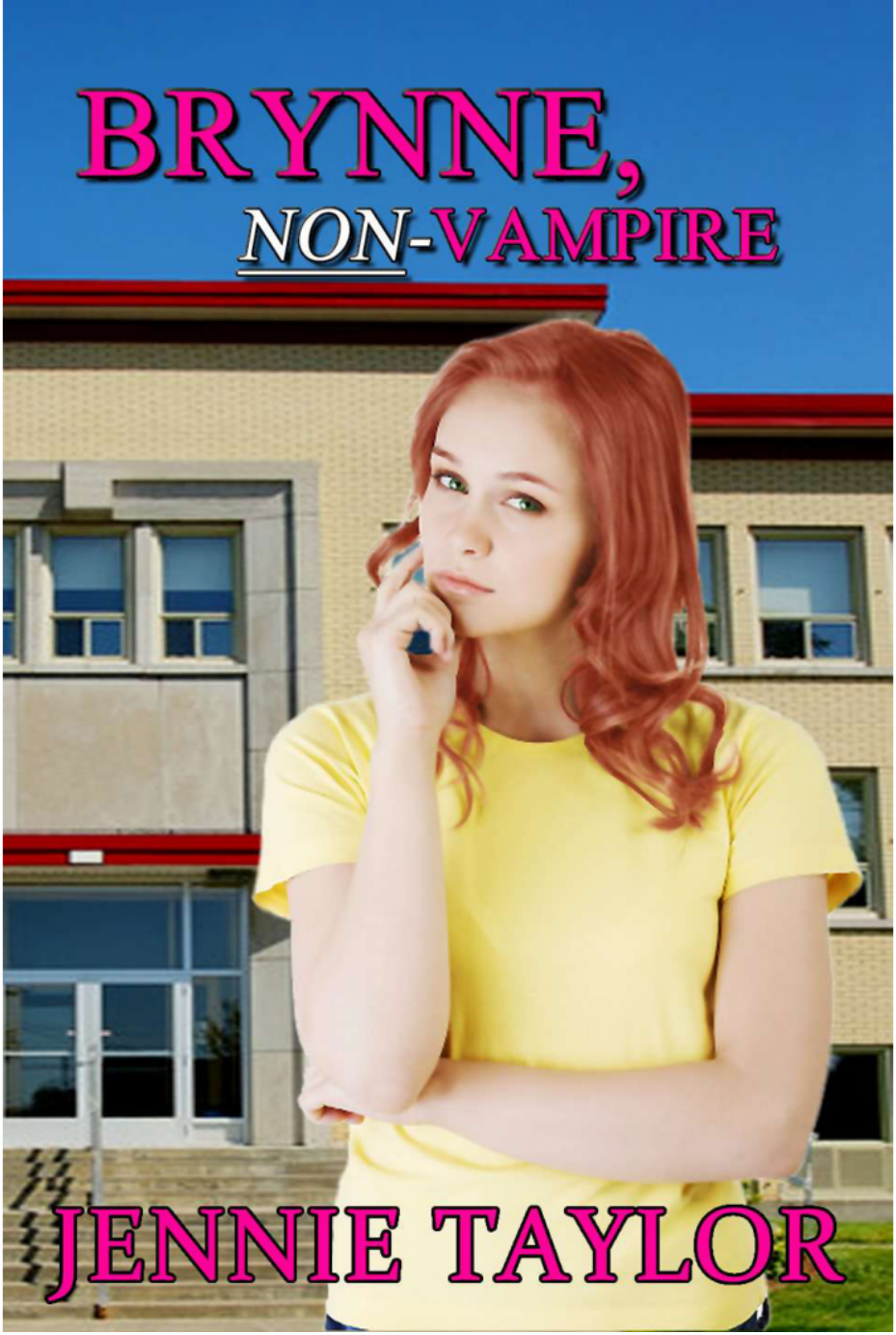
BRYNNE,
NON-VAMPIRE
JENNIE TAYLOR

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Non-Vampire

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This is once again dedicated to
Maggie, who is always my source
of inspiration in everything I do.
I love you, my Maggie!

Thursday, May 12

"Hey Brynne," my best friend, Jessica Sloan, said as I entered the little diner she works at after school. "Have a seat at the counter, I'll get you something in a minute, 'kay?"

"Sure Jess."

She loves this job. Well that's not true, she actually hates it. She loves that she makes her own money and her parents let her spend it how she wants. It gives her a sense of freedom. I sort of envy that. That she has a family to feel free from.

Jess is good with people. That guy she's serving would never buy that extra pie from anyone else. It's not that she flirts with them, she's just really nice and pays attention to people. She remembers them, remembers when they have problems at home or at work. I don't know how many times I've heard her ask about a sick relative of someone in here. And she knows things. Like she senses things about people. Kind of makes me wonder why she doesn't notice me.

"Same as always?" she asked me.

"I'm actually not hungry. Just a drink."

She got my drink and brought it over. The place is almost empty tonight, so she came around the counter and sat next to me. Some nights I come in here and we do our homework together, but neither of us have any tonight.

"Barney requests your presence at dinner on Saturday." she said. "We're grilling chicken."

Barney is her older brother. He's kind of creepy, to be honest. He's always leering at me. And when you've been around like I have, leering isn't something that usually bothers you. Barney's leering does.

"Something wrong?" she asked. "You seem depressed tonight."

"Yeah. Well, I'm just having a bad day, I guess."

"You wanna tell me about it?"

Do I want to tell her about it? In the worst way. But I've never told anyone about it. Not in all this time. I've had friends, hundreds of friends, but never anyone that I really cared about like I do her. To say the least.

"You, uh," I rubbed at my eyes. Wow, been a while since I cried. I mean really cried. Sometimes you have to fake it, for social purposes, when people expect you to cry. "Do you think you could take off early tonight, Jessica?"

"I need the money." She sighed and pulled a napkin from the holder and handed it to me. "Hey Micheal," she shouted. The assistant manager stuck his head out from the kitchen. "We're dead. Can I knock off a little early?"

"Go on. No point in me paying you to have girl talk anyway."

“Come on,” she said to me. “Let’s go for a walk.”

She’s several inches taller than I am. I think she *thinks* she’s stronger and tougher than I am, too, and she tries to protect me. It’s sort of funny, she’s been close to fighting a couple of times to protect me. If she only knew.

“So what’s up?” she asked. We're about three blocks from the diner. “Problems at home?”

“Jess, how long have we been friends?”

“I don’t know. A couple of years.”

“You know you’re my best friend, right?” I asked. I stopped walking. “My only real friend.”

“Brynne, what’s going on? Are you arguing with your parents?”

“You’ve never met my parents.” I told her. Why does this have to be so hard? Maybe I should just not tell her.

“I sort of got the feeling you were embarrassed.” she said. “Kind of like I am with my brother.”

“They’re dead.”

“What?” Her eyes were wide. It’s really dark out here, but I can see the look on her face clearly. I have really good eyesight. “When? Oh Brynne, I’m sorry.” Her arms started around me, but I stepped back. “Brynne,”

“Jess, they’ve been dead a long time.”

“What? You never told me.”

“I’ve never told anyone.”

“Well who do you live with?”

“I live alone. Very, very alone. All the time.”

“But... well how?”

Either she’s going to think I’m crazy when I tell her this, or she’ll freak out and want me dead. There’s a slim chance she’ll take option three, but I’m not holding my breath. Not that it would matter if I did.

“I get by. I have to tell you something, Jess. Something I’ve never told anyone, and you have to promise not to ever tell anyone else. Promise?”

“Yeah, sure.” She smiled a little. “You’re gay, right?”

“What?”

“It’s okay, Brynne. Really, I sorta guessed, I was just waiting...”

“What would make you think I was gay?”

“Well, I mean you’re...”

“Never mind, this isn’t... Why would you say that?” Great, like I need this distraction. “That’s not what I need to talk about. Now promise you won’t tell.”

“Sure.”

“I’m serious. There are people out there who would try to kill me if they knew where I was.”

“What?” She smiled a little. “Yeah, okay Brynne. What, you’re going to tell me you’re in witness protection or something now, right? Ha ha. You had me going for a minute.”

“No. Jessica.” I said.

I shouldn't even be telling her this, I should just run away like I always do. Or at least keep my mouth shut. But Jess is the best friend ever, and I don't think I can continue to keep this a secret from her. And after seeing that report earlier on the news about the woman in Wichita who was killed and drained of blood by some gang, I can't stop thinking about what I am. So... Here goes.

“In the past two years you’ve grown up. You’re older, you’re starting to look like an adult, right?”

“Are you saying I’m fat?”

I laughed. “How do you get that from what I said?” Her weird thoughts like that are part of what I love about her. “No, I’m not. I’m just saying you’ve gotten older. And I haven’t.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m saying in five years, when you’re twenty-two and in your last year of college, I’m still going to be fifteen. Or at least look like it.”

“You have me really confused now.” She shook her head. “You’re bragging about aging gracefully? Brynne, this isn’t like you, what’s going on?”

“I’m just saying that... I don’t age. My kind, we don’t age.”

“Your *kind*?”

Now she’s the one laughing. I guess I can’t blame her. I should have thought out how I’d say all this before I told her. It’s just that I’ve never told anyone before, so I had no idea it would be this difficult to explain.

“Yeah.”

“And, um,” She was giggling again. “What *kind* is that?”

“I don’t know, exactly. Alejandro only ever called us the eternals.”

“Who is Alejandro?”

“He’s the one that made me what I am.”

“Insane?” she asked, laughing some more.

“No. He killed my parents, and my younger brother. He tried to change them, too, but it was too late by then. He couldn’t, he had drank too much of their blood. I was the only one who survived.”

“You need to get some sleep,” she said, trying to control her laughing. “You’re cracking up, girl.”

“Do you have anything sharp?” I'll show her how different I am. Or at least one way I am different.

“What?”

“Sharp. Like a knife, or knitting needles, or something?”

“Yeah, I knit.” she said sarcastically. “You really are worrying me,

Brynne. You should go lay down."

"Fine!"

I looked around until I found a sharp rock. She watched me, and I could see that she was really quite concerned. I love her, and I hate doing this to her, but she'll be okay.

"Here," I said. I held the jagged edge up and slid it down my arm, gouging it and leaving it bloody.

"What the hell!" she shouted. She pulled her jacket off and wrapped it around my arm. "Why did you do that? Oh Brynne, I'm sorry I made fun of you. We need to get you to the hospital."

"Jess,"

"I didn't realize you would hurt yourself." She's starting to cry.

"I'm fine."

"Oh Brynne, why?!"

She is really upset. I guess maybe I could have done this better. Some way that wouldn't have made her think I was committing suicide right in front of her. Plus side, now I know she really does care about me. Not that I doubted that a lot anyway.

"Jess!" I pushed her back and pulled her jacked free from my arm and wiped at it. "See."

"See what?"

There wasn't a lot of light, so I pulled her along until we were within the small amount of glow from the corner street light. I raised my arm up, showing her the spot where the blood had gushed, where now there was a small mark, already turning into a small scar.

"It'll be completely gone by midnight." I said.

"Wha... but... but all that blood?"

"I'm trying to tell you; I'm not like you. I'm not... human. Not completely."

"I... I need to sit down."

I led her to the curb and she sat, her head between her knees. I shouldn't have told her. I should have done like I always have, just moved on after a couple of years. It's so hard to make friends that way, though. Knowing you'll have to leave them so soon. And I love Jessica. She's the best friend I've ever had, and the best person I've ever known. It would be hard to leave her.

"So... so this is a trick. This has to be a trick." she mumbled.

"No."

"Then you're... what, exactly? You just heal quickly, or is there more?"

"A lot more."

"Tell me." she said. She looked up at me. "Tell me, Brynne."

"What you really want to know is that I drink blood, right? Like Alejandro."

“What? So you’re… you’re a… vampire?” She loves vampire books, it’s no surprise she went there. Well, plus, I all but said it already.

“I’m so *not* a vampire.”

“Well then what?”

“I told you, all he said was we were eternals. Which didn’t turn out to be so true, since he died about a year later. He wasn’t able to tell me a lot, he barely taught me enough to survive.”

“Oh. So… but you are? Like, basically? Like a… one of those?”

“There are similarities.” Unfortunately.

“Do you read minds?”

“No, Jessica, that’s just silly.”

She stared at me for a minute. I’m sure she was saying all sorts of horrible things in her head, trying to get a reaction from me, testing whether I was lying about that or not.

“So you do? Drink blood?” she finally asked.

“It’s… sort of necessary.” I told her. That is the thing I’m most ashamed of.

“But it’s like… like in the books, where they can survive on animals, right? You hunt deer and stuff?”

“It has to be human.”

“Oh.” Her eyes went wide. “Oh! Oh!”

“I’d never hurt you.” I said. I scooted away. “You think I’d do that? You’re my best friend, Jess. Ever!”

“No, Brynne, I just… I don’t know what to think right now.”

“I’d never hurt you. I swear.”

“Okay, okay. Do you kill them?” She looked down. She’s shaking. “Oh gosh, please tell me you don’t.”

“I usually steal from a blood bank. Stealing seems better than the alternative.”

“It is. Do you always? Do you sometimes… kill people?”

“No.” I told her. “Not anymore.”

“Oh.” She looked around and thought about that for a while. She closed her eyes and turned her head toward me. “Not anymore. But you have?”

Her eyes were on mine now. She’s still scared of me, but I think she knows I won’t hurt her. But now she’s worried that I’ve killed people.

“A long time ago. Never on purpose. Only a couple of times when it wasn’t self defense. When I was new to all this, I did as Alejandro told me. Which meant drinking from people directly. Back then it was kind of hard to find blood otherwise. And when we were done, something in our saliva healed the wound and made it so they’d never even remember it. But sometimes it’s very hard to know when to stop.”

“I’m going to be sick.”

“I… I’m sorry, Jess. Do you want me to go away?”

“Yes.”

Well this sucks. At least I tried. I’m going to miss her more than I’ve ever missed anyone. But I couldn’t stick around forever. I could probably have stayed for a few years, but some day she would have noticed I wasn’t nearly as old as her.

“No, wait.” she said. I was getting up to leave. “Just tell me the rest. What else can you do, other than heal fast? Are you strong?”

“Yeah.”

“Like, bend the frame of a car sliding on ice strong?” There she goes again with the books.

“I’d be squished, just like you. I’m not indestructible, just strong. Probably enough to beat everyone in town in an arm wrestling contest.”

“Are you fast? Can you run a hundred miles an hour or something?”

“No. I’m fast. I probably would struggle to keep up with Olympic sprinters at first, but I could continue to run that fast for hours.”

“Cool. So… so how old are you?”

“Fifteen. And I’ll be fifteen for a very long time. He told me we age about a day every year and a half. I had been fifteen for about a month when it happened, so that would make me less than fifteen and a half.”

“But what… year?”

“Eighteen seventy one.”

“So you were born in what, eighteen fifty six?”

“Yes.”

“This is a bad dream, right? My best friend can’t be a vampire.”

“I’m not a vampire!”

“Sorry.”

“I can live a long time on regular food, I just need the blood once in a while, like once every couple of months. The rest of the time I live on regular food, I just get sick if I don’t have blood once in a while, I get weak. I don’t need to sleep in a coffin, I don’t turn into a bat, I’m not some evil, undead thing!”

“I’ve seen you in the sunlight, though.” she said. “How?”

“I’m not a vampire!” I took a deep breath. “I can go out in the sun. I burn easily, and that doesn’t heal as fast, but I can go out in the sun for short times. Especially with sunscreen. Still, probably no more than a few minutes, or it gets bad.”

“Bad like you’ll die?”

“I don’t know. The longest I’ve ever been in direct sunlight was about an hour. I was bright red for several days and peeling. It was

some of the worst pain I've ever had."

"You don't even sparkle." she said, a small smile appearing on her face.

She was getting it together. Her breathing normalized, and she was staring at her jacket now, probably worrying about what she'd tell her mother about all the blood. Funny thing, but even more than a century of life hasn't helped me figure out how to clean blood out of your clothes.

"Why are you telling me all this, Brynne?"

"We tell each other everything."

"You're more than a hundred years older than me. I don't know if I can be your best friend."

"Oh. Um... okay." I sniffled and rubbed at my eyes. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Wait." She sighed. "You're still the same person. I don't know about all this. How can I believe this?"

"You don't have to. If it helps you feel better you can just pretend it was all a story I made up."

"Yeah, that'll work. Sure." She stood up. "You owe me so many stories about your life, you know? But right now I have to get home. Mom and Dad will freak if I'm late." She wouldn't have even gotten off of work yet if it hadn't been slow, they aren't even expecting her.

"Okay. Jess, don't tell anyone this. The last time someone found out I had to make a very hasty exit from town. People got hurt."

"Like anyone would believe me." She tossed her jacket to me. "You owe me a jacket."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Bring it with you Saturday."

"You still want me to come over?"

"We have that huge shade tree out back. Will that be okay? Can you do that, stay in the shade?" she asked, concern in her voice.

"I'll be okay."

"Good. I just... I'll see you at school tomorrow, okay?"

"Thanks Jess."

She walked away from me. She was probably a block away when she started saying my name very softly. I ran down to her. Usually I do my best to run slow, as a girl my apparent

age and size should, but I didn't hold back this time, so I was there very quickly.

"Yeah." I said.

"Super hearing, too." she said, shaking her head. "So you really live alone?"

"Yes."

"That's got to be hard."

“I’ve been doing it for over a century, I think I can handle it.”

“But… you do live on Oak, right? In that house I’ve walked you to?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know, maybe Mom and Dad would let you move in with us.”

“Jess,” I stuck my arms around her in a swift motion. She tensed, but then relaxed and wrapped hers back around me. “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t think it’s the best idea.”

“I’m worried about you now.”

“I’m fine. Really. Go get some rest.”

“Do you sleep? I mean in the books…”

“I’m not a vampire!”

“But do you?”

“Quite well, sometimes. Sometimes I have bad dreams. But yes, I do sleep.”

“I’m trying to get this, Brynne, but I’m not sure I’ll wake up tomorrow and believe that any of this was real.”

“Maybe it’s better that way.” I said.

“It’s not better. You’re my best friend. I should know about this. But it’s out there, ya know?”

“Yeah. Sleep tight, Jess.”

I followed her home, at a distance. Behind houses and trees, far enough behind that she wouldn’t know I was there. I had to make sure she got there okay. She cried a lot on the walk, but she seemed okay. She was mumbling that this wasn’t real, but she got it together before she went in the front of her house. When she told her mother goodnight she sounded as happy and chipper as always.

I read some more news stories on the web when I got home. Apparently there’s some gang in Wichita that likes to pretend to be vampires. After beating people up and cutting them, they suck on their necks. If they only knew someone exists that is a lot like a real vampire in so many ways.

The problem with this, of course, is that it brings a lot of attention. Not a bad thing, because those that would kill me for being me see yet more reports of fakes and it lessens the chance that they’ll respond if anyone ever reports me. Alejandro said they were from the Vatican, and he called them the Venator Immortuorum. The problem is, if they come to investigate so close to where I’m at, and they happen to come through here then it gets dangerous for me. Alejandro thought they could tell what we were by looking. I have no idea how, since I think I look just like any other girl, but he said they would know.

Friday, May 13

Jessica didn't show up for school. We have two classes together in the morning, and she wasn't there. I tried to call her house between classes, but nobody answered. I considered going to check on her, but I thought maybe I was the last person on Earth that she'd want to see.

"Brynne, you're friends with Jessica Sloan, aren't you?" Mrs. Miller asked me.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Is she sick today?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't heard from her."

"If you talk to her, can you make sure she reads chapter twenty this weekend so she'll be prepared for the test Monday?"

"Yes, Mrs. Miller."

"Thank you, dear."

It's weird how this works. The very fact that I don't get older makes it easier on me in a lot of ways when it comes to school. I start out somewhere as a freshman or sophomore, and by the time I make it to the senior year, assuming I stick around that long, the teachers are all protective and extra nice to me because I'm so much smaller than the other kids and I look like such a little underdog or something. Seriously, I'm tiny and thin, so people seem to have this protective feeling toward me.

At lunch I couldn't eat. It's not that I was worried Jessica would tell anyone, because I don't believe she would. And I'm not worried about her, at least not that she's sick or hurt. The only thing that worries me is that I've lost the only real friend I've ever had. The only person I've ever let myself really care about.

Instead of eating I went out front and sat under a tree. I had a book from the school library, but my mind was too occupied to read. I was actually kind of staring at the clouds in the distance, zoning out a little. Which I guess is why I didn't notice her approaching.

"Hey." she said. She plopped down next to me in the grass.

"You're here!" I threw my arms around her.

"Yeah, honey, stop. People are looking."

"Oh Jess, I thought I'd lost you."

"N'kay, back off a little, hon."

"Sorry."

I backed off and she pulled an apple from her bag and bit into it. She held it out to me, offering me a bite. But then she pulled it back and looked down at it.

"Hey, if I eat after you I'm not going to like die or anything, will I?"

"You've eaten after me a million times."

“Well that’s true.” She held the apple out and I took a bite. “I was so sick last night.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Truth?” she asked. I nodded. “I kept picturing all that blood on your arm. And you,” She glanced around. “I kept thinking of little tiny Brynne, drinking blood from people, killing people.”

“I never should have told you.”

“I’m glad you did.” She said. “I think.” She bit into the apple again. “You actually scare me a little.”

“I’ll never hurt you.”

“I believe that. I do, Brynne. It’s just… you’re not *human*, ya know? It’s going to take a while for me to get used to that.”

“Time is something I have plenty of.”

“Yeah, I guess you do.”

She chewed her apple and took a napkin and paper sack from her bag, placing the apple core in the bag, and then the napkin after she cleaned herself with it. Then she took out a disposable tooth brush and cleaned her teeth, then placed that in the little sack.

“So explain this not getting older thing?”

“What’s to explain? I don’t get older. At least not much.”

“That sounds like a good thing to me. But you make it sound like a curse.”

“It’s not that I don’t look older, I’m not getting older. All the crazy hormones and stuff, still going on. Imagine that for over a century.”

“Yeah. Wow.”

“And then imagine having to leave every friend you have every couple of years because they’ll start asking questions about your age. I’ve sometimes worked hard at how I dress and my makeup, and I’ve pulled off eighteen. It was hard, and people still had comments all the time about how young I looked.”

“You do look young.” She kind of ran her eyes over me, top to bottom. “Yeah, younger than fifteen, honestly. Young and innocent. Is that part of this? Does changing make you beautiful?”

“No.” I felt myself blushing. Also something that never stops when you change. “And thank you.”

“So this is your life? You stay some place a couple of years, then have to leave everyone behind. That sucks.”

“It sucks a lot. What also sucks is outliving everyone you care about at all.”

“Yeah, that does suck.”

“Like one day I know I’ll go to your funeral. And I’ll still be fifteen.”

“Wow, morbid there, ya know.” she said. “You weren’t planning on hastening that event, were you?”

“Jess,”

“I’m kidding.”

She’s kidding. She’s making jokes about me killing her? Well that’s a good thing, I think. That means she is becoming at least a little more comfortable with this.

“I went to college a couple of times. Just a year or two here and there before I had to quit because of my age. But it was kind of fun. I studied computers once, and I thought about becoming a teacher, but then I realized how that wouldn’t work.”

“So what about... boys?” she asked. She rolled her eyes at me. “You never date. Have you ever?”

“Yeah. I mean I tried a couple of times, but it’s just not worth it.”

“Because you’re so much older than them?”

“No. And you still don’t get it, I’m not. I’m stuck at fifteen. I feel fifteen, I look fifteen. When I went to college, I had a couple of guys ask me out, but I just wasn't really interested. And I tried going out with them, but then I didn’t have anything in common with them, and I felt like a little kid when I was with them. I’m still just a teen girl.”

“Guys.” She said, rolling her eyes again. I wish she'd stop that. “So you like teenage guys? Then why do you not date, honey?”

“Well, I mean... I don't... know. I mean... so what, I get close to someone and then have to leave?”

“Oh. So, like, could you get pregnant? Could you have a little baby vam... whatever you are? I mean could you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried.”

“You’ve never had sex? In over a hundred and fifty years? With anyone?”

“I’ve never been in love, okay. When I was born it was really uncommon for a good girl to have sex before marriage. My parents would kill me if I did something like that.”

“You’ve lived alone for all this time, no parents, and you’ve managed to stay an innocent little virgin?” She said, fighting to contain her smile.

“Give me a break, Jess.”

She got up and put her trash in a bin, then returned to our spot. She reached up and ruffled my hair.

“Does that grow?”

“I’m not dead, Jessica.”

“Does it grow slow, like you age?”

“Yeah, it does. Kills me when it gets messed up, too. It could take years to grow out if I cut it short.”

“You’re going to be a teenager forever.” she said, smiling.

“Not forever, just the next six or seven centuries. Ya know what sucks is that he changed me too soon. Women in my family sort of

develop a little later."

"So you mean being flat doesn't run in your family?"

"Come on, I'm not *that* flat."

"Okay, okay. Some guys are into that." she said. She laughed and stuck her arm around me. "Pedophiles."

"Ha ha. Very funny."

"So you, what, are attracted to fifteen year olds, too? Since, ya know, you said you're stuck at that age in every way."

"Sometimes. But... I mean I don't know, I'm not that interested in anyone, really. Not right now."

"So if we could set you up with, say, Sam Finley..."

"Don't even say that." Sam Finley is a Junior, and a complete chess geek. "I'm not looking for any relationships right now, okay?"

"Has there ever been anyone really special?"

"No. I've never even gone on a second date with a guy. I just never... connect."

"Well that's okay, right? You said you'd just have to leave."

"I guess."

We got up and headed toward the building. Classes will be starting soon. This has gone exceedingly well. Jessica is still my best friend, even knowing what she knows.

"So why do you bother with school? Why come at all?" she asked.

"Well, where else am I going to go?"

"Anywhere. You could do anything, right?"

"I like school."

"Freak."

"I'm a freak for liking school?" I asked. Not for being whatever it is I am?

"Aren't you bored? Don't you know all this already?"

"I learn new things all the time. And I like being around people my age."

"Fine. So just tell me this, then: Where do you get the money to pay for everything, since you don't have parents supporting you?" She stopped and looked at me with an apology all over her face. "I didn't mean..."

"It's okay, I'm used to them being gone by now."

"Sorry."

"I have money, okay. For the past few decades the stock market has been good to me. Though I kind of stole the money I originally invested. It was a survival thing, I don't enjoy taking someone else's hard earned possessions."

"How much money do you have?" she asked.

"Does it matter? A lot, I suppose. I'm not even sure."

"So my vampire friend is rich, too?" she said.

“Shh! You have to be more careful.” I said, looking around to make sure nobody heard. “I'm not a vampire!” How many times do I have to say that? “And yes, probably, I am rich. So what, get over it.”

“I work hard, and you...”

“Jess, do you want me to give you money? Seriously? Would it mean anything to you if you didn’t earn it yourself?”

“It’d be nice to not have to worry about it all the time.” she said.

“Stop worrying. Trust me, if you ever need anything, really need anything, then you’ll have it. If I have to break into Fort Knox, you’ll have it.”

“Do you break into places a lot?”

“Not anymore. Not now that I can buy whatever I want.”

“And yet you don’t have a cell phone.”

“Who would I call?”

“Yeah, well how about me?” she said.

“But we see each other all the time.”

“Whatever. I should get to class. Talk to you later, honey.”

I guess it’s probably my fault that I don’t have many friends at school. I mean I work hard to remain distant. And while I do that on purpose, because I always try to limit the people I’ll miss when I leave, it sometimes gets lonely. And nobody even bothers to try to talk to me most of the time. I walk down the hallway, almost invisible, never talking to anyone. Usually.

“You need to try out for cheerleading next year.” Sharon Tremain said to me. There are always exceptions to this nobody talking thing.

“What?” It surprised me to be asked to do that.

“You’re small, you’d be easy to throw.”

“Um,” We have a competitive cheerleading squad here, and they go to the national competitions every year. “I... can’t. Sorry.”

“Why not?” she asked. She looks angry now.

“Weren’t we in gym class together last year?” I asked her.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Never mind.”

She trudged away. We did have gym class together, and I was terrible in it. I was slow, I was uncoordinated, I couldn’t serve a volleyball and couldn’t hit a basket with the basketball. I ran out of breath easily and had to stop when we ran the mile, I couldn’t do even the one pull up the coach asked of us, and I was always the last person picked when we teamed up for anything. All of it was on purpose, of course, but it has worked wonders, and everyone pretty much thinks of me as a little wimp, and leaves me alone because of it. Of course there have been times when someone pushed me around, but because I’m so tiny and wimpy there’s usually someone coming to my aid.

School was slow and boring. Jess is right, I don’t really need to do this. What are they going to do, throw me in jail for truancy? I have to

forge papers just to get into school all the time. I mean if I have to show a birth certificate anywhere I can't exactly whip one out from eighteen fifty six, can I? I never actually had one, honestly.

"Hey Boo-boo." Jess called out to me. She says I remind her of Yogi's friend, somehow. I don't get it. "Wait up."

"Do I need to bring anything tomorrow? I can get some chips or burger or something."

"Nah, Mom and Dad already got everything." She put her hand on my shoulder. "You should come with me and Tony tonight."

Tony is her sometimes boyfriend. They go to the movies a lot, but that's about it. They don't even go to dances, or out to nice restaurants or anything. Mostly they are movie buddies. I think that's her choice, not his. She's just not that into him. He's sort of in the 'just friends' box. Poor guy doesn't even realize it, either. I don't know if he knows how lucky he is to have her either, though.

"I'm not going to be a third wheel." I told her.

"Well I don't like you sitting alone all the time."

"Puh!" I shoved her shoulder playfully. "You worry *now*?"

"Ow." she said, fake look of hurt on her face as she rubbed her shoulder. "Before I had no idea you were sitting alone all the time. I thought you at least had your parents around."

"I'm okay, Jess. Don't worry."

"What about those people?" she said. She glanced around, then leaned closer. "The ones you said would kill you if they knew."

"It's not like they're looking for me, they just don't know I exist. Alejandro said I should keep it low and they'll never come looking for me. The people, the hunters, the Venator Immortuorum, from the Vatican... They think they wiped out all of us, they don't know there's one left." At least I don't think so.

"Yeah, about that," She led me away from the other students. "You've gone to church with my family. How does that work?"

"What'ya mean?"

"It's like, consecrated ground, so how can you enter?"

"I'm not a vampire!"

"Okay, okay. I just meant... well, can you like, touch a cross, or does it hurt you?"

"Ya know, I know this is all new to you, and it'll take a while to adjust to, but you keep assuming I'm some kind of evil monster. It actually sort of hurts my feelings."

"No, Brynne honey, I didn't mean it like that." She hugged me. "You're my best friend, I know you're not evil."

"Yeah, anyway," Time to get out of this conversation. "You and Tony have fun tonight. I'll see you in the morning."

"What do you do at night?"

“I read. I walk around. You’d be surprised how entertaining it can be to sit in the dark somewhere and listen to people who don’t know you’re there.”

“Seriously?”

“Well,” I shrugged. The way she said that made me feel a little guilty. “It’s not like I peek in people’s windows or anything. I just... have good ears. Anyway, I do have a television, ya know? And I have... don’t laugh at me, but I have a very extensive doll collection that I sort of... pose into scenes, I guess.”

“You play with your dollies.” she said in a baby voice. “That is so cute.”

“Sto-op.” This is embarrassing.

“Okay, so, have fun with your dolls tonight. I’ll see you in the morning, hon.”

“Later.”

I sat on my nice, cushy sofa, with my dolls lined up on the coffee table. Yeah, it is kind of childish. I don’t care. When I was growing up I didn’t have dolls like this. We spent the last year of my normal life moving across the country in a wagon and worrying about being attacked by Indians. Before that, I spent most of my time working with my mother, cleaning the clothes, making the meals, washing things, milking cows, feeding animals. Back then it took hours to make a meal. There were no microwaves or electric ranges, no prepackaged food. It was hard work.

Jenna was having a dinner party tonight. Jenna is my favorite little doll. She’s kind of like me: a little smaller than the others, same reddish hair, pale. Her friends, Marti, who looks a lot like Jessica, Sara, and Janine were all gathered at the table, waiting for her to serve their meal. No guys tonight. They were all down at the shop, working on Joe’s car.

“Jessica just doesn’t understand this, Jenna.” I said. “She thinks this is silly. She never had to go years without anyone to talk to, though. All those times I had to run away, I always made sure to bring you with me.”

I left the dolls to their party and went to the grocery store. I know I’m not expected to bring anything tomorrow, but I figure I’ll bring something to drink, and some chips and pretzels and Cheetos. I also got a package of mini candy bars. Everyone likes at least one in the bag. And then I need to find a jacket for Jess.

After coming back from the store, I sat on my sofa and stared at my dolls. Children’s toys. I’m still just a child. I want to grow up, but it’s not going to happen. Not for a long, long time. I can pretend to be grown up, act adult, fight every instinct I have. I’ve done it before. It sucks worse than being a child.

Thanks to Jessica and all her talk about me sitting at home alone all the time, I was feeling really lonely. I've had times before when I felt lonely, but it seems worse now. Now that she pointed it out. It's like it's worse when someone else notices it.

I've had months when I spoke to no-one, when I stayed alone in an old hunting cabin in the woods, or even sleeping outside. That is not life. I chose to do that because I felt like I shouldn't be around people.

The worst was right after the last time I killed someone when drinking from them. I felt like I was a monster and shouldn't go around anyone. That was probably five years after he changed me. I spent an entire winter in the woods, alone. I was so weak by spring that I think I was close to death. I would have welcomed it, almost, because I was so lonely.

And now is worse. Because Jessica sees it too. And the worst part is that I don't have to be alone. I could have gone with her. Instead I exiled myself to this house that I pay two hundred a month extra for, so the landlord won't ask too many questions about why a young girl is living alone. I told him my family left me a lot of money when they died, and I just didn't want to wind up in the foster care system. He didn't buy it, but he also didn't ask any more questions.

I guess I'll go to bed. Is it really only eight? The nightmares will be bad tonight. They always are when I've been thinking of the people I have killed.

"'Night, Jenna." I said. She didn't answer. She never does.

Saturday, May 14

I showed up at the Sloan's early, around ten in the morning. I stood out front, under a

tree, wondering if it was too early to go inside. But I can hear everyone moving around in there. I think Tony is here, too. I don't see his car, but I think I heard his voice. I guess I'll go in.

"Well hello Brynne, how are you this morning?"

"Good, Mrs. Sloan, how are you?"

"Brynne, honey, why do you always ring the bell? You know you're welcome here, you don't have to ring the doorbell."

"Thanks, but I just don't feel right walking in without being invited."

"Well come in."

No, I don't have to be invited in. I can just imagine Jessica asking me that. She still has this silly idea that I'm a vampire, which in her mind probably means I'd have to be invited in.

"What is this?" Mrs. Sloan asked. "You didn't need to bring anything. Did Jessica tell you to bring this?"

"No, she told me not to. I just thought... I just wanted to."

"Well, thank you. Why don't you put these snacks in the kitchen. Jess is up in her room. She's got that boy up there, so feel free to interrupt."

I could hear Jess giggling about something. I walked as softly as I could as I went up the stairs, planning on surprising her. And then Barney came out of his bedroom, the first one at the top of the stairs, and alerted everyone to my presence.

"Hey Brynne." he boomed. He stepped across in front of me.

"Hi." I replied.

"You look good today."

"Thanks."

He's twenty years old and lives with his parents. He's not in college, he's not working, he's basically a bum that sits around and plays computer games all the time. I've heard him in there, playing until three in the morning, on nights when I stayed over with Jess. I keep telling myself that is all I've heard him doing in there. He's such a creep.

"I'm going to start the grill in a while. How well done do you like your chicken?"

"Burn it." I said.

"So you like your meat hard and crisp?"

"Um," What a jerk. "I'm actually not that picky. I usually avoid meat."

"After you've had mine you'll never say that again."

“Yeah, um, I gotta go talk to Jess, okay?”

I pushed past him, working very hard not to break something of his, like a rib or a shoulder. When I stepped into the open doorway for Jessica’s room, she and Tony were sitting on the end of her bed, smiling at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Jess said. She covered her mouth with her hand.

“Hi Tony.”

“Hey Red.” He stood up. “I’m taking off.” he leaned down and kissed Jessica. “Bye ladies.”

Jessica laughed and covered her mouth again as Tony went down the stairs and said a very strained goodbye to Mrs. Sloan. She doesn’t like him, and I don’t think he likes her, either. Jess never gets to hear that strain between them, I’m sure. Mr. Sloan seems to like Tony, at least.

“Here’s your jacket.” I said. I tossed it at her.

“Thanks.”

“What’s funny?” I asked her. I sat next to her. She makes me feel so small.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” she said. She was holding back the smile, but her eyes were laughing.

“I’m going to find out, whatever it is. You know that, right?”

“Nothing to find out.” she said, losing her battle with the smile.

“Do you want me to compel you to tell me?” I asked.

“Wha... you...” She smiled and leaned over and started tickling me. “You can’t, and you know it. You shouldn’t have told me so much, if you want to make threats like that.”

“How...” I had to stop to laugh and squirm. “Do you know I wasn’t lying?”

“I can tell.”

Okay, I really can’t take the tickling. It always makes me feel like I’m going to pee. Why do I let her treat me like this? I could stop her. I could physically stop her.

“Sto-op.” I said when she slowed down to let me breathe.

“Or what?”

“You aren’t scared that I’ll retaliate?”

“Not really.” She stopped and let me up. “I figure if you were going to do anything to me you would have before now.”

“You have given me plenty of chances, letting me spend the night so often. You are a really sound sleeper, nobody would notice you were dead for at least a day.”

“Okay, we really need to stop talking about death.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

She went to her closet and was digging at the back, muttering to herself in words I didn't understand. Then I heard something like 'aha' and she was back out of the closet, holding a box. She was smiling again.

"So I figured," she said. She held the box out toward me. "You should have these."

"What is it?"

"I just figured I'm done with them, so you may as well have them."

I took the box from her and opened the lid. Dolls. Several of them. Very well taken care of, I must say. Is this a real gift, or is she just making fun of me.

"Thanks, Jess." I said. I felt a tear trailing down my face. "This means a lot to me."

"Okay, they're just some old toys I don't need anymore, don't get all emotional."

"Sorry. I just don't get a lot of gifts, so it means a lot when I get one."

"Hey, it's not like I never gave you anything. I gave you that cool necklace for Christmas last year."

"You mean this one?" I said. I hooked my finger under it and held it away from my neck, so she could see. "I've worn it every day since you gave it to me."

"Aw, I didn't know you wore it every day. That's sweet."

"Jenna will be happy to have some new friends." I told her.

"Who is Jenna?"

"She's my favorite doll."

"Aw, that's cute." she said in a baby-talk voice.

"Hey, don't make fun of me. Those dolls were the only friends I had for a long time. They like... they're stability to me, ya know. The one thing I can rely on."

"I think of your life and it makes me feel so sad, honey."

"No, it's not that bad. And hey, we need to talk about something else. Barney is coming."

She turned her head toward the door and he didn't come. She looked back at me, a little confused. But then she could hear him on the top of the stairs.

"Told ya."

"Let's go out back." she said.

"Mom wants you to help with the food." Barney yelled.

We went downstairs and out to the back yard. Mrs. Sloan wanted help chopping salad, cutting up a bunch of fruit, slicing cheese, and bringing drinks out in the cooler.

Barney had the chicken on the grill. The problem is that the table is right in the sun. I can't stand there. I'll burn. Usually I'd find some

way to get out of helping in this situation, or I'd offer to go in and get things ready inside, something. And it's well known by the Sloans that I burn easily, so worst case scenario I can usually give that excuse. Today I didn't need to.

"It's too hot here." Jessica said. "Why don't we move the table over to the shade."

"Yes, Barney, help move the table." Mrs. Sloan said.

"Alright, alright." he said.

He grabbed the end of the table where he was standing at. Mrs. Sloan was on one side, and she reached for some of the things on the table that might fall over. Jessica was doing the same on her side. I was standing at the opposite end as him, and he was staring at me. So I reached out and made a very weak attempt at lifting the table. I got it off the ground, then let it slip back down, making the necessary grunts to show how hard I was trying.

"Oh for Heaven's sake," Mrs. Sloan said. "Jessica, get over there and help. She can't lift that by herself."

"Yeah, hang on." Jess said.

She sat everything she was holding down on top of the cooler, then came over to my side. At that point I had the cover I needed, so I did most of the lifting. Jess was giving me kind of a scowl, like she was asking me if this was all really necessary.

"Thanks." I said.

"Yeah, no problem." She ruffled my hair. "Not your fault you're a tiny little weakling."

"Don't tease her." Mrs. Sloan said.

"That's okay, Mrs. Sloan." I said. "I'll get her back. The next time she needs help in Geometry I'll just give her all wrong answers."

Mrs. Sloan went into the house to get the chips and things I brought. Mr. Sloan was just coming out of their bedroom, it sounded like. He sleeps in a lot on weekends, as he works hard all week putting roofs on houses, so he sort of deserves a break. I could hear them talking about Barney getting off his butt and mowing the lawn tomorrow, and Mr. Sloan hoping I don't come over, so at least Barney won't spend all day ogling me. See, I'm not the only one who notices it.

I feel kind of guilty about listening to their conversations like this. They think they have privacy, and it feels a little like I'm violating that. But I can't help having really good hearing. And it's not like I can just choose to not hear them. Still, that look Jess gave me when I told her I listen to people for entertainment makes me feel extra guilty today.

"Did you see that dress that Amanda Bussel wore to school yesterday?" Jessica asked me.

“Oh my gosh, that was hideous. What was she thinking?”

“I think she thinks it was pretty, but it was so not.”

“I know, and she had those tennis shoes on with it. Come on, that doesn’t even make sense.”

“This whole conversation doesn’t make sense.” Barney said. “Who cares what she wore?”

“Stay out of this.” Jessica told him.

“Well,” He took a drink of a beer that he shouldn’t even have. “Why do you care what she wears? I’m not a fashion expert or anything, but you shouldn’t be talking, Jessica. Half of what you own looks like they were designed for a boy.” He took another drink, then pointed at me. “You should take tips from Brynne, she always looks cute.”

Wow, he’s really getting on my nerves. And from the look Jessica is shooting him, she feels the same way. I seriously am fifteen. He may think I’m seventeen, but I’m not. And even if I were, it’s still really creepy that he would be so overly interested in a teen girl. And the disturbing part is that it seems completely normal to him. He should get out and meet girls his own age.

“Feel free to kill my brother.” she said. He had gone in to use the restroom.

“I’ll consider it. Do you think your parents would be upset?”

“Dad would probably throw you a party. He’s sick of paying for Barney to sit around and do nothing.”

“Should I dispose of the body, or leave it to be discovered?”

“I’d bury him somewhere.”

“I don’t know,” I said. I leaned back against the tree and reached for the latest Seventeen magazine, which she has a subscription to. “I don’t think I’d want any of his blood in me.”

“I used to ask Mom if he was adopted. Turns out Mom has an uncle that she says Barney is just exactly like. The uncle is in prison somewhere.”

“Nice.”

“So do you want to spend the night tonight?” she asked. She reached up and straightened my hair a little. What am I five?

“You want me to? I mean... after I told you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Okay. Or maybe... I mean now that you know, maybe you could come to my house. I mean... it’s sort of... it’s not like your house, it’s kind of specific to my tastes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means there are dolls, okay.” I said, a little embarrassed. “And posters of people from some television shows I like, and all kinds of fantasy art, like fairies and elves and stuff. And my clothes are sort of

on racks instead of in closets. I like to make things, like, out of clay, so I have these little villages I made around. They aren't really very good."

"I'd love to see them."

"And... well... I mean my refrigerator doesn't have a lot of *normal* food in it."

"Good tip. Avoid the fridge, got it." she said.

"And I have really heavy curtains."

"Of course."

"And... there's a couple of guns."

"I didn't know you were into guns." She leaned back to look into my face. "I always thought you were sort of the non-violent type."

"I am. Look, I'm not... I'm a girl living alone, okay."

"So you, what, get scared?" She laughed. "Seriously?" I nodded. "Oh." Her arm went around my shoulders. "I didn't think you were scared of anything, honey."

"I'm scared of a lot of things."

"I thought you were stronger than everyone, and you can't be killed, so why be scared?"

"I just..." I shrugged. "Sometimes I get scared, okay. Wouldn't you? And I *can* be killed."

When the chicken was finished, we all sat around the table and Mr. Sloan said grace. We ate our food, and they chatted like they always do when I'm here. And then I was cutting a watermelon, and I glanced over at the newspaper Mr. Sloan was reading. There was a story on the front page about someone being attacked. A witness saw a girl either licking or sucking on open wounds on a man who later died from blood loss.

"Oh, ow." I slipped and cut my hand with the knife. Blood was going everywhere.

"Good heavens, Brynne!" Mrs. Sloan said. "Oh, that looks bad, honey."

"No," I wrapped a paper towel tightly around it. "It's just a little nick."

"Let me look at it."

"No, it's fine Mrs. Sloan. Um, Jess, can you help me clean it out and put a bandage on it?"

"I really think we should check it, you might need stitches." Mrs. Sloan said. She was over beside me now.

"No, really, it's just a little cut. I'll be fine."

"Do you want me to call your parents so they can take you to the emergency room?"

"No, I'm fine. Jess?"

I grabbed the watermelon, telling them I'd throw it in the trash, it

was ruined after me bleeding on it. I dropped it in the trash on our way to the restroom. I ran my hand under the water. It had already almost stopped bleeding.

"That was so stupid!" I said. "I... I should be more careful. Especially when handling someone's food."

"Everyone slips now and then, chill."

"No, you don't get it. If they got a little of that on their food, it would be bad."

"Bad how?"

"Just bad."

"Bad." she said. Her eyes went wide. "Would it make them a vampire, too?"

"I'm not a vampire!"

"Sorry."

"And no, not that much. That much would just make them really sick. Probably."

"Probably, why probably?"

"Look, I don't know exactly. Alejandro, all he ever told me was that a little will make them sick, a lot will change them, too much will kill them. And then also if they don't get enough to change them, it could make them sick enough to die, maybe."

"Wow."

She backed away from me and sat on the side of the tub. She's getting it now, getting how dangerous I am to her. I should never have told her, I should have just gone away. But I couldn't bring myself to. I don't know if I could get by without her now. Not feeling the way I do.

"I wouldn't ever let that happen." I told her.

"What? Oh, I know."

"Look, do you want me to leave?"

"Don't be ridiculous." she said. "Mom and Dad would be upset if you didn't stick around for dessert. Although we could tell her you wanted to go home so your Mom could check your cut."

"No, Jess, I mean... I mean do you want me to leave? Leave forever. So you don't have to deal with all this."

"No way. Un-uh. You're not bailing on me. Not now." She got up and came over to me. "I'm sorry if I'm not handling this well, but it's not every day you find out your best friend and favorite person in the world is a vam... sort of like a vampire."

"So you're not freaked?"

"Of course I am. But come on, you're still my Brynne. Still my best friend. I'll deal."

"Thanks Jess."

"Come on, stop that."

“Stop what?”

“Crying. You’re not a big crier, kind of freaks me out when you do it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, so let’s see what we can do with your cut.”

We wrapped it in a bandage, which I guess I’ll have to wear for a few days now. If I don’t then they’re going to see that the cut isn’t there anymore. Or won’t be in a few hours, anyway.

“They’re taking an awful long time.” Mrs. Sloan complained to her husband. I could hear Barney grunt.

“Well tell me one thing,” Mr. Sloan said. “How is it Jessica has a boyfriend, and Brynne doesn’t?”

“That’s your daughter.” She reminded him.

“Well, yes, but her friend...”

“Is hot.” Barney said.

“That's not what I was going to say.” he told Barney. “I’m just curious what it is about her we don’t know. Why is it she doesn’t have a boyfriend also. Is there something wrong with her that we don’t know about? Is she into drugs, or in a gang, or something that would keep her away from boys?”

“That’s just stupid. Brynne’s a nice girl, Dad.” Barney said. “Maybe she’s gay.”

“Maybe she really *doesn’t* like boys. You're right.” Mr. Sloan said. I could imagine him nodding.

“You two stop it!” Mrs. Sloan said. “A girl doesn't need a boyfriend to be happy. And besides, some girls are just a bit shy. And we should not be having this conversation.”

Okay, so I was listening again. And Jess was staring at me, wondering what it was I was doing. And now I feel horrible, because she caught me snooping. Great. And I have to tell her.

“I was listening, okay?” I said. “To your parents.”

“Do that often?”

“Look, have you ever been in a room where someone was talking, and you couldn’t stop listening, even if you didn’t want to hear it? That’s what it’s like for me a lot of times. That’s also why my house has been insulated against sound, so I can get some peace.”

“Okay. So what were they saying?”

“You want me to snitch on your parents? Jess, I am *so* shocked.” I said mockingly.

“Fine, whatever.”

“Your dad was wondering why I don’t like boys. Barney was speculating that I’m gay. Your mother was telling them to shut up.”

“He thinks you don’t like boys. Wow. Shocking that anyone would come to that conclusion.” she said, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, we

should go back out. This time I'll cut the watermelon."

"Make sure you wash the knife." I told her. "I forgot to grab it."

"Got it. And then after dessert, let's go check out your house."

"You still want to go?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I?"

We went back out and everyone was staring at me, waiting for me to tell them how bad the cut was. I held my bandaged finger up and wiggled it and smiled, which calmed them down. You'd be surprised how much a smile calms people.

Jess took the knife inside and washed it, and she brought a different knife out with her to cut into the second watermelon. She managed to slice it without damaging herself. While we ate, I kept looking around trying to find the newspaper that Mr. Sloan was reading. I had to misread that, this can't be happening. I'm supposed to be the only one left.

"So, um, is it okay if Jess comes to spend the night at my house tonight?" I asked Mrs. Sloan.

"Did your parents okay it?"

"They're not in town this weekend."

"They left you alone?" Mr. Sloan asked.

"She's seventeen, Dad, not five." Jessica said. "They leave her alone all the time."

"We're not going anywhere or anything, just watching movies or listening to music." I said.

"I don't see why it would be a problem." Mrs. Sloan said. "As long as you girls behave."

"No boys." Mr. Sloan said. He was eyeing me when he said it.

"Not a problem." I said. "All the boys I like happen to be big stars that wouldn't be caught dead in this town."

Let them chew on that. Maybe that will stop their speculation. Hey, at least it lets them know that nobody here interests me in the least. And Barney can stop imagining me and him ever being together in any way. Creep.

We gathered some of Jess' stuff and headed off to my house. We walked, since she doesn't have a license yet, either. We're like the last losers in school who can't drive. I've never driven. Not once in all my years.

"So how much did you actually feel that cut? Like, at all?" she asked.

"You have this idea that I'm some kind of super human, and I'm not. I mean... I'm not normal, but I do feel pain, ya know. And it hurt. Bad."

"So if I punched you..."

"Wouldn't hurt a bit."

“But…”

“I said I feel pain.” I smiled at her. “You can’t hit hard enough to cause any.”

“Oh you are so dead, Campbell.” She swung at me, giving me a fake punch on the arm.

“So seriously,” I stopped and grabbed her arm. “Do you want to know how to really hurt me?”

“Why would I…”

“Because then you’d know. So you wouldn’t have to be so scared.”

“Brynne, I’m not scared of you.”

“You are. But it’s okay.”

“So stake through the heart?”

“Well, that’s a start. It wouldn’t kill me, but it would hurt a lot.”

“So how do I kill you?” she asked. She was smiling and kind of rocking from one foot to the other. She wasn’t being serious, and didn’t expect me to give her an answer.

“Do anything you can to hurt me. Shoot me, deep cuts, the stake, all those are good. Then lots of salt.”

“Salt?”

“Yeah. It stops me from healing so fast. Then you have options. You can burn me, you could cut me up, and the very easiest way is to behead me.”

“Wow, um, Brynne, I don’t really want to think about this.”

“Sorry. Just… so you know how to hurt me now.”

“Got it.”

“Look, I’m not good at this, but I’m trying to tell you… I trust you, Jess. With my life.”

“Okay. Got it.”

“No, you don’t. Seriously, in over a century I have never trusted anyone until now.”

“Creeping me out, hon.” she said.

“Sorry. Let’s… sorry.”

It’s so awkward trying to explain to her that I think she’s the best friend anyone could ever have. I mean I can say it, but it doesn’t really mean anything if she doesn’t understand. Like truly, deeply understand.

“Don’t make fun of me.” I said. I unlocked the door and opened it for her.

She walked inside and spun around, taking in the whole room. She walked over to some posters I had and spent a while staring at Jo Banner, an amazing pop singer. Then she stopped at the coffee table and stared down at my dolls, at the little dinner party from the previous night.

“Cute.” she said. “Wow, this place is so… pink.”

“I like pink.”

“I always thought va... your kind liked dark colors.”

“*I* like pink. You’ve got to stop believing that I’m like one of those characters in your books.”

“Obviously you are not.” She was looking down at my dolls. “So let’s see the rest of the house.”

“Not much to see. I don’t use the bedrooms, except to store clothes.”

“Where do you sleep?”

“On the sofa. Which, by the way, I guess you can sleep on tonight. I’ll just toss a blanket on the floor.”

“You don’t have a bed?”

“Never really seemed necessary before now.”

“You’re so weird, Brynne.”

“Yeah, anyway, just come in here.” I said.

I took her into the kitchen. I want to get this out of the way, so she isn’t scared of what she’ll find. I dragged her over to the refrigerator. After our talk earlier, I knew she’d have a problem with this, and she’s kind of nervous now, I can tell.

“In the freezer,” I opened it up. “Is ice-cream. I love the stuff. There’s like five kinds in here, if you want any.”

“Good to know.”

“And,” I opened the refrigerator, and she closed her eyes.

“Brynne, I really...”

“Just look.” She opened her eyes. I have one little bag of blood, and I held it up. “See, it’s nothing. Don’t freak out about it. Seriously.”

“But... that’s... human blood?”

“Yeah. Um,” I looked at the bag. “Type A, if you want to know.”

“Oh. Um...” Her eyes are fixed on it. “I guess that’s no big deal. I mean it’s not like you killed someone. Though there could be someone with type A that needs a transfusion, and you took the last of it.”

“I try to be careful to only take what there’s plenty of.”

“Oh.” She swallowed hard and grabbed onto the refrigerator door. She’s really nervous. “So do the different blood types taste different?”

“Not that I’ve ever noticed. Though you can sometimes tell if a lot of it comes from someone who eats a lot of fat, or from a vegetarian.”

“Which do you prefer?”

“I actually try not to think about it either way.”

“Why?”

“Well,” I stuck the bag back in the door. “I don’t like that I have to have it at all.”

“You don’t? So you think it makes you a monster?”

“No. Hun-uh. I’m just a girl that has to have a different kind of food. It’s no different than someone who has to have constant

transfusions, ya know. I just have to get the blood in a different way."

"I didn't really think of it that way. Yeah, I guess that makes sense." She sighed, then smiled at me. "It actually helps to think of it like that."

"You can put your pop in here. It's not like the refrigerator is contaminated or anything."

"Yeah, okay. I guess."

"Ya know, I know this is all a lot to take in, Jess. I mean... I mean if you want to just take off and do this some other time, I'd understand. You won't hurt my feelings." Okay, that's just a lie.

"No, honey, it's okay. I'm fine. So, let's see what kind of channels you get on the television."

"Everything that is available on the satellite."

"Cool. So we could watch some steamy porn movie, huh?" She was joking with me, I think.

"Um... if you really want."

"What, you don't watch that stuff?"

"Not really my thing."

"What would you rather watch?"

"Um, I like a lot of stuff. But... I watch Disney a lot." I think I'm blushing.

"Seriously? What kind of vampire watches Disney?"

"I'm not a vampire!"

"Yeah, well, basically." she said. She reached up and ruffled my hair. She keeps doing that.

"Ya know, the soundproofing in this house works both ways. Nobody would hear your screams."

I shouldn't have said that. That was exactly the wrong thing to say to her when I know she's a little scared and very nervous. Even though she should know I'm joking, it's still going to be in her head now.

"We should go get some snacks." I said. "I'm in the mood for chocolate."

"Why does it make me so nervous when a vampire talks about going out for a snack?" She smiled. "Okay, okay, you're not a vampire." She ruffled my hair again.

"You confuse me." I told her. "Your reaction to this, I mean."

"Did you expect me to run away screaming?"

"Maybe. At least that would make sense. But you seem mostly okay."

"You're still my best friend, honey. And it's going to stay that way, no matter what."

"But... what about when you go off to college?" I asked her.

"Well you're going too."

“Jess, I can’t. I… I’ve done that, it doesn’t work so well.”

“Well then you come along and do something else. You can even go to high school there, if you want, since you seem to like it so much.” She ruffled my hair again. She’s starting to annoy me with that. “And then we can hang out after school.”

“That won’t work, Jess. You’re getting older, you’re going to want to go out with the people you go to school with. You can’t drag a kid around with you. Besides, you’re going to want to do more in your life. Things I’ll never be able to do.”

“You’re my best friend, and you’re always going to be my best friend. No matter what.”

“What about years from now, when you meet a guy you really love, and you two get serious? If you’re together with him for more than a couple of years he’s going to start asking who this weird girl is that keeps coming around, the one who doesn’t seem to get any older.”

“If that were to happen then we’d just have to explain.” she said, as if it were that simple.

“But Jess,” She doesn’t seem to understand that I can’t have a lot of people know this. Maybe I could tell a guy, if she were really going to marry him. Someone she trusted that much. “I guess we’ll deal with that later.” I told her.

“You have to stop worrying so much, honey. You’re my best friend, and I promise we will make this work. Whatever comes up, I’ll take care of it.”

“You’ll take care of it?”

“That’s right. I’m not letting anyone come between us.”

“Let’s just go get our snacks, okay.”

So she’ll take care of it. It’s weird, because I’m more than a century older than her, at least based on birth date, but she’s still trying to protect me, just like she always has if anyone messes with me. She’s taking control of the situation, so I don’t have to handle it. So I don’t have to worry. I really love her. I don’t know if I should be doing this to her, getting her involved in all of this, but I’m glad she’s stepping up.

“M&Ms, or Hershey’s?” she asked. She was holding a bag of each.

“Both.”

“Pig. You may be skinny now, but you keep eating like this and you won’t be.”

“I actually can pretty much eat what I want, I don’t seem to gain weight.”

“Figures. Another advantage of being a… one of your kind?”

“I don’t know. I was sort of like that before. Not that we really had a lot extra back then.” I wish she wouldn’t talk in the store like this.

“How is it this crazy little red head can eat anything and not gain weight and I just look at chocolate and gain five pounds?” she asked the ceiling. Or God, maybe. Never can tell with her. “And then she’s going to look young forever. That’s so not fair.”

“Are you done feeling sorry for yourself now?”

“Not quite. But let’s go anyway.”

We were waiting in line, and Jessica was scanning the magazine rack. She picked up a fashion magazine and sat it up on the counter with our snacks. I guess she assumes I’ll pay for that, too, now that she knows I have some money. And she grabbed a pack of orange Tic Tacs and tossed it up there too.

“Are you done spending my money?” I asked her.

“I’ll pay for my part.”

“That’s okay Jess, I’ll get it.”

“No, I don’t want...”

“Jessica, how often do I come to your house and eat your food? I think I can handle paying this time.”

“Well you forgot the popcorn.” she said. “If we’re going to watch movies...”

“I know, I know. Go get some with extra butter. I’ll stay here in line.”

While waiting for the couple in front of me to pay with a check, I ran my eyes over the magazine rack that Jess had been looking at. I like to get the newspapers, I like to do the crossword puzzles in the back. And I noticed another paper with a story about someone having their blood drank. It was a different story, from a different town, and this time the girl who had been drained of blood was dead.

This can’t be happening! There have been a couple of times in the past when I’ve seen gangs or weird cults do things like this, so maybe that’s happening again. I hope so. I hate to think of the alternative.

When we got back to my house we sat on the sofa. Jessica was staring down at my dolls again. She thinks they’re childish. Maybe she’s right, maybe I should put that stuff away and just grow up. But I *like* my dolls.

“Jenna was my friend before you were born.” I told Jessica. I picked up Jenna and held her out toward Jess. “She likes clothes. You wouldn’t believe her wardrobe.”

“Yeah, okay. Not like you at all, huh?” She laughed.

“I admit it, I have a bunch of clothes.”

“You could wear something different every day for six months.”

“If you want something, take it.”

“Brynne, honey, none of your stuff would fit me.”

“Some of my jewelry would.”

“That’s okay. I’d just have to explain to Mom and Dad where I got

it."

"Tell them I gave it to you. Surely they wouldn't have a problem with that."

"Yeah, then I'd have to tell them where *you* got expensive jewelry."

"Yeah, okay. So look, if you want to know, there is a gun in the coffee table and one in the cabinet above the kitchen sink. They're loaded, so don't play around, okay?"

"Why do I need to know that? Plan on abandoning me?"

"Maybe I plan to attack you, and you'll need to defend yourself."

"Um, okay."

"I keep making stupid comments like that. I'm probably going to scare you."

"No, it's..."

"Sorry Jess. I guess this is sort of new for me too."

I put popcorn in the microwave while Jess flipped through the channels, trying to find something good to watch. I dumped it from the bag into a bowl and got us some pop to drink. And when I got into the living room, Jess was watching the news.

"Here." I said, holding pop out to her.

"Thanks." she said softly.

"You didn't open the candy yet?"

"No."

"What is wrong with you?" She's all weird and passive, or something.

"You didn't hear from in there?"

"Microwave." I said, shaking my head.

"Oh. So where..." She pulled her legs up on the sofa and grabbed the bowl of popcorn. "...were you last night?"

"Here."

"Oh."

"Jess,"

"No, it's nothing."

It's nothing. Only she was watching the news. And now she's acting weird. And she wanted to know where I was last night. I opened the coffee table and took out the gun and held it out to her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"You're scared of me." I said. "Take it."

"Brynne,"

"Take it! You think I could do something like that?" I know what she saw on the news. "I told you, I don't do that."

"Then you did hear?"

"No, but it's in the newspaper. I've been trying all day to convince myself that it wasn't true."

"Okay." She took the gun from me and put it back into the coffee

table. “I don’t think you could do something like that.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me down to the sofa. “Calm down, honey. I’m sorry I upset you.”

“You don’t even trust me!”

“Brynne,”

“Just go home. I thought we were friends.”

“We *are*. Stop it.”

“Well I don’t want someone in my house that thinks I’m just a killer.”

“I’m sorry, Brynne. It’s just you’re the only vampire I know, and…”

“I’m not a vampire!”

“Shh. Okay, okay.”

She put her arms around me and held me for a while as I cried. This is so upside down. I’m the freak, I’m the scary monster, she should be the one crying and I should be trying to convince her that everything is okay.

“I just didn’t know what to think. I know you’re not a monster, honey. I know you’d never do that. I just was shocked at what I was seeing.”

“I should have never told you. I ruined everything! Now I have to leave,”

“No,”

“And I’m going to miss you. I’ve never had a friend like you, I never felt so close to anyone, and now it’s… I shouldn’t have said anything.” It's going to be the most painful thing I've ever done.

“Stop freaking out!” she shouted at me. She shoved me away from her, then grabbed my shoulders with her hands. “Stop it!”

She wrapped her arms around me again and held me for a while. She doesn’t deserve to have a freak for a best friend. She’s outgrowing me, anyway. At some point she’ll want friends that are more adult. At some point she’ll *be* an adult, and who wants a kid around all the time then?

“Are you okay now?” she asked. “You really are an emotional wreck today, aren’t you?”

“I’m scared.”

“I know.” she told me.

“No you don’t.”

“You don’t think I’m scared of losing my best friend? You don’t think I’m scared that whoever is doing that to those people will make life hard for you?”

“Okay. Okay.” I slipped away from her and got a tissue. “So you’re scared, too. Except you’re scared of *me.* And… and that really makes me…”

“No, honey,”

“It sucks to feel like I can’t even tell my best friend, because she’s scared now. And I’m sorry for what I am, Jess. You don’t know how many times I’ve wished that guy had killed me along with the rest of my family.”

“Stop, Brynne. Come on, just calm down. I’m sorry if I did something to make you feel bad. I’d never do that on purpose.”

“I just…” I shook my head and wiped my eyes. “And now… I mean there might be more like me. I… I have to go find out. I have to try to find them.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Well I have to. I can’t just let them keep killing people, Jessica.”

“Call the cops.”

“And tell them what? I’ll just go find who is doing this and talk to them. Maybe I can explain to them how to get by without killing people. Most people are reasonable, so maybe they are too.”

“Okay, well that sounds really naive.” she said angrily.

“I can at least try.”

“I’m going with you, then.”

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen.”

“I’m not letting you go alone.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“I don’t want you going alone.” she insisted.

“Well it doesn’t really matter, unless I can figure out a way to find them.”

“Just let it go. Eventually someone will take care of it, right? If there really are people trying to kill your kind then they’ll definitely see all the news coverage these monsters are getting.”

“Yeah, and that’ll lead them right to this part of the country.” I sat down next to her. “This sucks! Why can’t someone else be around to do this? I don’t want to do this.”

“Don’t.”

“I have to.”

“Well promise me you won’t do anything for a couple of days, okay? Just give it a couple more days so we can think about this and try to figure it out.” she pleaded.

“I’m not going anywhere until I have a better idea how to find them.”

“Good.” She picked up my doll, Jenna, and stuck her into my lap. “Now, you still want to watch movies?”

“I guess.” I pulled Jenna up and hugged her against me. Okay, so I’m a baby.

We watched movies for a couple of hours. After a while I was able to put my other concerns out of my mind enough to at least enjoy the movies and the snacks, and spending time with my best friend ever.

Then we decided to get some sleep. Jessica argued with me for a while about the sofa. She thought I should have it, it's my house. We both wound up on a blanket in the floor, just to keep from arguing.

I woke up in the middle of the night and I could hear her breathing hard. I sat up and I could see her sitting on the sofa. She was holding the gun from the coffee table, and she looked upset.

"Jess."

"Go back to sleep." she said.

"What are you doing?" I turned the light on. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." She looked down at the gun. "Oh, this isn't because of you." she said. "But this place is kind of creepy. At least after all I suddenly know."

"I guess I get that."

"Plus it's not nearly as sound proof as you said. There's a dog barking that is driving me insane. If I can hear it, they could hear my screams." She gave a little smile.

"I was just joking about that. I mean it's pretty good as far as sound proofing goes, but you can still hear stuff. There's just enough sound deadening so I can sleep without hearing everyone in the neighborhood argue and... have their intimate moments."

"Eww! I so did not want to think about that. So seriously, what is up with this dog?"

"You have really good ears for a normal person. That dog barks all the time. I've gotten used to it." I sat next to her. "You want me to show you how to use that thing?"

"Um, yeah, sure."

I took the gun from her and removed the bullets. Then I showed her how to cock it, how to aim, how to pull the trigger. I had her do it a couple of times, and I explained to her that it would feel and sound a lot different with bullets in it. That her best bet, if trying to shoot someone, is to aim for big parts, like the chest area, because you're a lot less likely to miss than if you aim somewhere like the head. And all this I learned from watching television, because I've never fired a gun with any ammo in it.

Sunday, May 15

"I better get home. Mom and Dad will wonder why I haven't returned from my vampire friend's house."

"I'm not a vampire!"

"Whatever you have to tell yourself so you can sleep, honey."

"Hey, um Jess." I grabbed her arm. She was already opening the front door. "I want you to have something." I held a key up. "In case you ever... need anything."

"Cool." She grabbed the key. "Thanks Brynne."

She was down the steps and out of sight before I could close the door. I just had a friend stay over. That's the first time since I was ten, about a century and a half ago. I hope I can stay here a long time.

"Do you think we could go with her when she goes to college, Jenna?" I asked the doll. I flopped onto the sofa. "Do you think we could get by with that? I don't know, though. I kind of worry that people would notice this college aged woman hanging out with a kid all the time. Maybe it wouldn't seem weird, people have sisters and cousins and neighbors, but her college friends would tease her, probably. And they'd definitely notice I wasn't getting older if they were close friends of hers and saw us together a lot."

It's not going to work. Only I really want it to. I'm so sick of being alone. I love my dolls, but they aren't people. Jenna is the closest thing to a real friend I've ever had before now. If she were real, would she be jealous of Jessica?

I turned on the computer and started searching. There have been half a dozen attacks in the past few months. The only pattern that I see is that some take place in other towns around this area, then they are followed a couple of weeks later by one in Wichita. Always in bad neighborhoods, always on cloudy nights.

I went into the kitchen. Okay, so I'm not big on doing dishes. I mean I don't let them just sit around filthy, but I tend to rinse them good and then just wash whatever I need. Not that I cook much, I almost always eat out. But now I have dirty pans and plates, because I made pancakes for Jess for breakfast. So I guess I'll go clean. I hate cleaning.

What else am I going to do today? I hate Sundays. Jessica's family likes to spend time with her, and I don't begrudge them that, I just feel really alone. Sometimes they invite me over, but it seems like I'm intruding. Besides, Barney really does creep me out.

Monday, May 16

So we're studying for finals in every class now. The past week we've been given tests and our last projects and papers. And our History teacher gave us all a note explaining our grade as of now and what she thinks we need to study more of before the final.

"You're getting a D!" Jess said. "How do *you* get a D in history?"

"Yeah, laugh at me. Go ahead."

It's after school, and we're headed to her house. She, of course, is getting an A in history. I really don't understand that class at all.

"I'm sorry, Brynne, it's just that you were there for half of that stuff."

"Well the stuff I know about didn't happen quite the way the history books say, okay."

"Such as?"

"Such as... I don't know. Like there were still people with slaves when I was growing up, even after the civil war."

"Are you kidding?"

"No, seriously. It was horrible. It was like some people just wouldn't accept that the war was over and they lost." I told her.

"But, didn't you take this class like forty times already? How do you almost fail?"

"Look, okay, sometimes I have a hard time remembering stuff like that. It's so boring, and I just don't care much. You go to school for as long as I have and you see if you don't get bored."

We approached her house and I could see Barney sitting in their front yard. He was in a lawn chair, shirtless, and sleeping, I think.

"What is he doing?"

"What? Who?" She looked around to see what I was looking at.

"Oh, sorry. You're brother is asleep in the front yard."

"You can see him from here? Wow. Nice."

"I think he's trying to get a tan, but he fell asleep. At least it looks like he's asleep."

"He's probably trying to look good for you." she teased.

"By getting skin cancer? That's *so* attractive. Anyway, I guess he hasn't noticed that I don't really like the sun." Or him.

"Okay, so like the other night, last night, Mom and Dad were talking about him while he was over at Ned's house." Ned is his best friend. Sort of. They both play online games together, I think. "They were talking about him being way too attentive to you when you're around."

"Seriously?"

"You do realize he's completely entranced with you, right?"

"Yeah, I've sort of noticed that." Don't really understand it, but I

noticed it.

"He's a freak. I can't believe how gross that is." she said. "Oh, honey, not that it's gross for someone to think you're attractive, you're a very pretty girl, I just mean..."

"He's way too old to be thinking about a little girl? Yeah, I sort of came to that conclusion months ago."

"I'm really embarrassed to be related to him."

"Eh, there's a fifty-fifty chance in a few years he'll turn out to be a good guy. I've seen it before."

"I wish he'd get there quickly, then." she said.

"I'm going to head to my place. I'd really rather not bump into him today."

"Yeah. Oh, hey, did you hear? There was another attack kinda like the others. In Parsons."

"There was?"

"Dad was talking about it at breakfast. It was in the paper."

"This is going too far." And now I really do need to do something about it. Innocent people are dying and nobody really knows the reason why other than me and Jessica.

"Isn't there someone you could call? Like those people you say hunt your kind down? Just like give them a tip off about where these vamps... eternals, can be found."

"Sure, and while I'm at it I'll just turn myself in so they can slaughter me. Besides, I'm not convinced they mean to kill. Maybe they just don't know better yet." Keep telling yourself that, Brynne.

"You're not doing anything stupid tonight, are you?"

"Do I ever do anything stupid?" I ask.

"Apparently in history class."

"Ha ha." I punched her arm. Maybe a little harder than I meant to. "Go wake your brother up before he turns into a lobster."

"I think I'll let him burn."

"It's your call."

So if I turned them in I would be turning myself in, too. Like I told her. Not that I'm even sure how to contact the Venator immortuorom, or if they really exist. If it comes to it, then I would do it. I can't let them keep killing people. If I have to turn myself in and die along with them, so be it.

I have thought about ending my unnatural existence a few times before. I should not exist. I'm convinced of that. Whatever turn of events came about to create my kind, it should not have happened. And at times I've felt alone and guilty enough about what I've done that I thought of ending it all. But I've come to think maybe I'm here for a reason. Like maybe I can help people. I'm still trying to figure out how, but I'm working on it.

I spent the night looking for more details about the attack and the previous attacks. They're awful. But I still think maybe the ones doing this just don't know better.

I have to go. I have to try to find them. Even if I promised Jessica I wouldn't. She's going to be so upset with me. I can't let them keep doing this, though. I'll make it up to her.

I packed up a couple of things to take, mostly money and a debit card. Before I left, I got a box and put Jenna inside, then wrote a note to Jess telling her I was sorry and that I'd call in a couple of days, and please take care of Jenna for me, I'll be back for her. I figured she knew how much that doll meant to me, so she'd know I was coming back if I left it with her.

I headed out around ten, dropping the box off on the steps of the Sloan's house. If I run, I should be in Wichita early enough to find a place to rest before it gets too bright outside. It is nice to be able to run really fast for hours at a time. I'd give it up just to be a normal human again, though.

Tuesday, May 17

I spent most of the day sleeping. Late in the afternoon I went shopping and bought a

prepaid cell phone. I activated it, but there was no service for a long time. Then I just went walking around in the neighborhoods where the attacks seem to usually take place, hoping I might find the others like myself. I took a break to call Jess after a while.

"Brynne?" Jessica asked. The phone only rang one time before she answered. It is so nice to hear her voice. I miss her.

"Sorry Jess."

"I hoped it was you. Come home."

"I have to do this."

"It's dangerous. Just come home."

"I'll be back in a couple of days." I promised her.

"You're doing something stupid."

"I just want to talk to them, Jessica. I'm not fighting these people, okay. I'll be fine."

"They're monsters, honey. Do you understand that?"

"Jessica, I think I understand this situation better than you do. Look, I'll be back in a couple of days. I promise."

"You better be."

"Hey, I swear it'll be okay."

"Okay." I didn't know she was crying until she sniffled. "Be careful."

"Jessica, I swear it will be okay. I'll see you in a couple of days. Love you, Jess."

I spent the evening and night walking around the seedier neighborhoods, sneaking around as much as possible, trying to find them. I tried going places I would go to hunt, if I were going to, but it's been so long that it just doesn't come naturally anymore. I wound up by some college dorms before I gave up around dawn and headed back to the hotel.

Wednesday, May 18

Jess said she had an interesting time coming up with excuses for me at school. She's so worried, and she keeps telling me she's going to come over here if I'm not back soon. That would be very bad. She said she'd be bait. Like I need that to worry about on top of everything else, right? I wouldn't be able to survive if something happened to her. I am not putting the one person I care most about at risk like that.

I spent another night wandering around in the trees, waiting and watching. I was certain that an attack would come, but I was also fairly sure it would be across town from where I was at, no matter where that would be at the time. My odds of finding them were really pretty slim, but I couldn't give up.

And I wasn't giving up, not completely, but I was going back to the hotel for the night. And so I stepped out onto the sidewalk and headed back across town. I would come looking for them again tomorrow, I told myself. Except that's when they found me.

I could hear them. At first it wasn't much, just movement in the bushes. They were being careful, stalking me. There was nobody else around, so they would be attacking soon, I figured. I stopped on the sidewalk.

"You can come out now." I said. I hadn't turned toward them. "I hear you." I waited, but the movement had stopped. They were waiting. "I know what you are. I'm like you. Come out. I just want to talk about the attacks."

It took another minute of waiting, but eventually a woman and a man came out from the brush. She was probably almost a foot taller than me, and skinnier than even I am. He's huge. Not much taller than her, but he has to weigh three hundred pounds and it looks like it's all muscle.

"I'm Brynne." I said.

"This is Joanna." he said, nodding toward her. "I'm Julius."

"It's nice to meet you." I said. I was just being polite, because I'd really rather be anywhere except here. "So where can we talk?"

"We have nothing to talk to you about." the woman said. "Find your own place to hunt."

"I don't hunt." I said. These two scare me. *Really* scare me. "That's what I want to talk about."

"How do you manage that?" he asked.

"Blood banks."

"Ugh." she muttered. She looks disgusted to even be in my presence.

"Listen, you do know there are people out there that would kill us if they knew where we were?" I said.

“So?” she said.

“Bring ‘em on.” was his response.

“Look, if you can’t deal with the blood from the blood banks, then maybe we can talk about how to do this without killing them.”

“Or we could talk about you staying out of our business.” she said.

This is getting nowhere. Great. I hate this! Why do they have to be so difficult?

“So how long have you been around?” I asked her.

“That has nothing to do with this.”

“Yeah, I... I’m just curious.”

“Fifty years.” she said. “About.”

“And you?” I asked him.

“Same.”

“So... so who did this to you? I mean... is he still around?”

“Somewhere.” he answered, shrugging.

“I was told I was the last. The one who changed me, he said he was the last before me. So when he died, I thought I was it. I haven’t seen another like us in well over a century.”

“There’s a lot of us out there.” she said.

“Do they all kill?” I asked. I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter right now. What I’m trying to do is talk to you about this. Because it’s coming down on my head. Those people, the hunting squad or whatever that is looking for us, they’re going to see what you’re doing and they’re going to come here. And that puts me at risk.”

“So move.” he said.

“I’m not moving. I’ve lived in Hanton for a long time, I have a home and best friend and I’m not leaving. But you’re bringing people to this area. If you could just not kill them, then it would be okay, as long as you were careful not to be seen.”

“Don’t tell us what to do!” she snapped. She started toward me, but he grabbed her arm.

“I’m not telling. I just... I’m asking. Please, stop. These people don’t deserve to die.”

“That’s not your business.” he told me. “And I think our discussion is over. You should go away.”

“I can’t let you keep doing this.”

“Who’s going to stop us?” she asked. “You? You’re just a girl.”

“I... Please, just stop.”

“What, or you’ll cry?” she asked, laughing.

“You don’t have to be like this. You don’t have to kill.”

“You should go.” he told me. “Now!”

His look conveyed the message he meant it to, I think, which is that I am very much in danger if I don’t leave. I didn’t want to turn my back on them, so I backed away. I kept my eyes on them until I

was probably a hundred yards away, then I turned and ran. All the way back to Hanton.

Thursday, May 19

I didn't go to school. I was too tired from running all night, and too upset from failing to change their minds. Something has to be done. Maybe I should take a gun and go kill them myself. Shoot them, then burn or behead them.

I actually found myself shaking when I heard the doorknob rattle. I froze, there on the sofa, and waited. If it was them I would have been dead, because I didn't even make a move. Instead it was Jessica.

"You're back!" she shouted. She ran over and hugged me. "Are you okay?"

"No. They wouldn't listen, Jess. They actually sort of threatened me. I couldn't stop them."

"It's not your fault. You tried."

I told her the whole story of what happened, whining and complaining the whole time. She took it well, stayed calm, and actually managed to calm me down a lot.

"So why didn't you answer when I tried to call earlier?" she asked.

"The phone never rang." I said, glancing over at it.

"I called your cell phone."

"Oh. I left it in the hotel room. I sort of just ran, like a scared little girl,"

"You are a scared little girl." she said.

"I didn't go back for it."

"Great. So you finally get a cell phone and then you just leave it behind. Great job, Campbell."

"Sorry. If you really want me to, I'll get a good cell phone so you can keep track of me better."

"It would make me feel better, hon." She ruffled my hair. "I worry about you. So what are you going to do next?"

"I don't know. Maybe I better... maybe I should call someone. Like... I don't know how to contact them, even. It's not like I can just take an ad out in the paper saying 'hey vampire hunters, come here'."

"You're not a vampire." she said. We both laughed. "So these people, they're like what, a secret group with the church? Isn't that what you said? Like part of the Vatican, or something?"

"I don't know. Probably. That's what Alejandro told me, anyway."

"So there's your answer. Call the Vatican."

"I'm *so* sure the receptionist knows about this secret society. *Hello, can you put me through to the Venator Immortuorum, please.*"

"Well it's a start. And who knows, maybe if you're persistent it'll get their attention."

"Yeah."

It'll get their attention and bring them right to my door. To kill me.

They'd never believe me if I told them I'm not the one killing people. But I can't do nothing.

"Listen, give it a few days and think it through." she said. "You don't want to jump into something without thinking it through."

"Yeah, you're right. Why is this *my* problem?" I wiped my eyes. "There should be someone else taking care of this. Like, an adult, or something."

"Sucks, doesn't it?" She put her arms around me. "We're going to take care of this together."

"I think in the past if this had happened I would have just ran off to some place far away from here. But... like, I can't do that now."

"Because of me?"

"Well yeah. I mean... I never felt like this about anyone before. I mean... I have a best friend now. I can't run."

"Listen, honey, if you need to go, don't let me stop you." She is trying so hard to sound like it doesn't matter if I go.

"You don't understand at all. Jess, I've been alone for so long, and I've never had a close friend. That's important to me. I'm not leaving."

"Does that mean you'll come to college with me?" she asked. She smiled. "'Cause I'd really like you to."

"If you want me to."

"Yay!" She threw her arms around me. "Thank you!"

"But the dolls come too."

"Of course they do." she laughed. "And you need to come to my house to pick up Jenna. She has been missing you."

"Yeah, uh, just because I have conversations with my dolls it doesn't mean you need to."

"What, you think I can't tell that she misses you? By the way, she said next time you pack her in a box you really better put some padding in there, because the cardboard isn't comfortable."

"Yeah." I laughed at her. "She never liked that. Hey Jess, thanks."

"Come on," She ruffled my hair. "Let's go get your dolly."

Saturday, May 21

I was invited over for burgers this weekend. Mrs. Sloan didn't ask about my parents this

time, at least. I hate lying to them. At least it wasn't sunny.

"I thought Tony was going to be here." Mrs. Sloan said.

"He'll be by later. He's bringing his cousin along." Jess told her.

"Who is his cousin?" Barney asked her.

"He's visiting for the summer. From Georgia. His name is Andre, he's eighteen, and Tony said he's a real nice guy." She elbowed me and smiled.

"Don't even think about it." I said.

"What?"

"You're trying to set her up with Tony's cousin?" Barney asked. He started laughing.

"I'm with Barney on this one." I told her.

"Brynne, you might like him!" she complained. "Though he may not be your type, I guess." she said, kind of staring at me and frowning. "I didn't think about that." She *so* knows.

"She's not going to like some dweeb with a southern accent." Barney told her.

"That's not very nice." Mrs. Sloan scolded.

"Probably true, though." Mr. Sloan said.

"Can't you all just behave around company?" Mrs. Sloan asked. "Brynne, I'm sorry my family are all so rude."

"That's okay, Mrs. Sloan."

"I still say she's gay." Barney mumbled.

"Barney!" Mrs. Sloan snapped. "Brynne, I'm so sorry. Please forgive my very rude son."

"That's okay." I smiled at the situation. He thinks that not responding to him means I'm gay. Puh-lease! I'd never respond to him, anyway.

"But if you are, honey, that would be alright." she said.

"Nobody here is going to judge you." Mr. Sloan said.

"Thanks, but I'm not." I said, my heart racing at the lie. "Though I did *almost* go out with a girl once." Why did I just blurt that out? I'm so stupid!

"Seriously?" Jessica asked. "You never told me that."

"I said almost. I mean... well, it was a long time ago. I was..." Lonely. "Curious. And bored." Okay, so I'm sure I'm blushing. "She was really nice to me, I just felt bad for turning her down, okay." Everyone is still looking at me. "Next topic, okay? Please."

They dropped it, but I still felt really embarrassed. The time I almost went out with a girl was way back in the eighties. I looked her

up once a few years back. She was married to another woman and had three kids through in-vitro. Wow, she's got kids almost as old as I am now.

Since it was not sunny, Jess wanted to play volleyball. Only she wanted to wait until Tony and his cousin got here, so we could play two on two. Her and Tony against me and whatever his name is. Great, just what I wanted. I grumbled the whole time we were setting up the net.

So when they arrived I saw that Andre really was a cute guy. We sat around the table in the back yard and talked for a while, while the boys had some leftovers. He even seems like a nice guy. If I were interesting in being in a relationship with a boy, I might be interested in him. Jess was right. But I'm not wanting a relationship with anyone right now.

"You realize I'm not letting you win." I whispered to her. We were both at the net. Tony was serving and Andre was back to return it.

"Bring it on, little girl." she said.

We were leading, but Jess tried to spike it at me. I returned it, and was at the net, waiting when Tony hit the ball back. I jumped up and spiked it over the net, putting us one point away from victory.

"Shorty's got ups!" Andre said.

"Yeah, but you wouldn't be winning if the sun would come out." Jess said.

She stopped moving and I stopped and she stared at me, her eyes wide. I can't believe she said that. Around them!

"She, uh, has a skin condition." Jessica explained.

"I burn really easily." I said. "Like, *really* easily."

"Are we going to finish this?" Tony asked.

We won on the next point. And then we quit. I made an excuse so I could leave, because I really wasn't in the mood to be around people all of a sudden. I don't know, I just get that way sometimes. I just have to be by myself. And sometimes it's hard to see Jess and Tony together and know I will never have that with anyone.

I sat at home and watched television with my dolls. I had the little stable set up on the table and the horses were grazing around it. Jenna was standing to the side, watching the horses. All her friends were sitting at a picnic table, waiting for their burgers.

"Jenna, why does life have to suck so bad? If I leave now then I'll miss Jessica for the rest of my life. And that could be a very long time. And she'll hate me for the rest of hers. I can't have her hating me."

A new show came on Disney, and I leaned back on the sofa to relax and watch it. And then my door flung open and Joanna and Julius were standing over me.

"Joanna was quite upset after our little conversation the other

night." he said.

"I... I'm sorry."

"Sorry won't cut it, bitch." Joanna said.

"We decided to have a little talk of our own to explain to you how displeased we are with you interfering."

He held me down and she started hitting me, punching my face over and over, and scratching. I tried to fight back, but he was stronger than me, and he held firm. She brought out the knife then. It was huge! She tore at my arms and legs with it, dozens and dozens of tiny cuts, and the she started on my stomach and chest. She plunged the knife into my stomach, poking all the way through me, sticking out my back. She slid it up, then twisted, nearly gutting me. And then there was salt. Lots of salt. I guess they know about the salt. I was fading in and out when they ran off.

"Brynne?" I heard Jess saying. "Oh shit, Brynne!"

I felt her hands on me, but it just caused more pain. She has to go! They'll kill her. They're going to come back and kill her. Then they'll kill me. I don't care if they kill me, as long as she gets out. I can't let them hurt her!

"You have to run." I said.

"What honey? Brynne, what happened?"

"Gun. Jess. Gun."

"What? You're not making any sense."

"Get the gun!" I shouted. She didn't respond as if I had shouted, though, so maybe it wasn't as loud as I though it was.

"What? Why? What happened, honey?"

"The ones from Wichita." I struggled to say.

"Who? I can barely understand you. Oh my gosh, this is salt, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"What do I do, Brynne?" She's crying. Why is *she* crying, I'm the one in pain. "Do I take you to the hospital?"

"No."

"Then what? I don't know how to do this." I was barely alert enough to see her, but I could tell she was beginning to panic. "I have to call Mom and Dad."

"No. Dangerous."

"You need help."

I honestly missed a lot of the following conversation. All I know is that she was holding me up with one arm as we stumbled toward her front porch, and I could see that she had a gun in her other hand.

"You have to help her!" Jess shouted. I think her parents are here somewhere, but everything is a little blurry. Oh yeah, there they are.

"Barney, dial 911." Mr. Sloan shouted.

“No!” I shouted. Or said as loud as I could, anyway.

“You can’t.” Jessica told them. “She can’t go to the hospital.”

“What?” Mrs. Sloan asked. “She needs help. She’s bleeding everywhere.”

“She can’t go to the hospital.” Jess said.

“Tell… them.” I said. I shook my head and everything cleared a little. “Just tell them.”

“She’s like a vampire.” Jess said. “Only not evil.”

“Jess, we don’t have time for this.” her dad said. “What happened?”

“She was attacked by other vampires.”

“Jess, have you been drinking?” her mother asked her.

“It’s true! We have to clean her up, we have to…”

“Call 911.” her dad said again.

“No. She’ll heal. I think.” She turned to me. “Brynne?”

“Just… bath, okay.” I said.

“Just help me get her in the bathtub!” Jessica told them.

“Jessica, be serious. She’s really hurt, we’re not playing games here.”

“Dad, I’m telling you the truth! Oh damn it! Just wait.”

She sat me down on the stairs and then disappeared for a minute. Everyone is staring at me. If I were more alert and able to move, I’d probably run away. For good. Because people shouldn’t know about me. It’s dangerous. For them and me. Mostly me, I think.

“Here.” Jessica said. She stepped up in front of me. She raised a steak knife up and cut her finger.

“Jessica!” Mrs. Sloan shouted.

“Open your mouth, Brynne.” Jess said.

“Ew, gross.” Barney said.

“What are you doing?” Mr. Sloan asked.

Jess stuck her finger in my mouth. In my daze, it took me a minute to figure out what she was doing. My saliva will make her heal more quickly. As long as it doesn’t make her forget everything that happened tonight, it’ll be okay. That tends to happen, the forgetting. There’s something in our saliva that causes it.

Now the only problem… blood. You put a bloody finger in my mouth and it is sort of hard for me to stop sucking. But I’m weak, and Jess was able to pull her finger out.

“See, it’s already healing.” she said, holding her finger up.

“I don’t understand anything that is going on here.” her mother said.

“I’m proving to you that she’s a vampire.”

“I’m not…”

“Oh, except she doesn’t like being called that!”

“No hospital.” I said.

The next thing I know, Jess and her mother were lowering me into the bathtub. It hurt bad. Really bad. But it washed most of the salt away. I sort of passed out somewhere in there.

Sunday, May 22

I woke up in Jessica's bed. I could see the daylight coming through the curtains. Mrs. Sloan was standing in the doorway.

"Where's Jess?" I asked. It hurt to talk.

"You're awake." Mrs. Sloan said. She's not smiling, she's not happy, she's sort of gloomy looking. "Jessica is eating breakfast. Her finger is completely healed."

"Oh. Good."

"So you are a... a... um, vampire?" she asked. She's on the verge of tears.

"Not exactly, but close enough."

"Does that mean that Jessica is... I mean you sucked on her finger. Will she... be one too?"

"It doesn't work that way. She'll be completely okay."

"Oh." She blew out a breath and let her tears come. "Thank goodness!"

"I should have never told her. I should have just gone away. I'm sorry."

"Why did the others come attack you?"

"Because I tried to talk them into not killing people."

"Jessica says you don't do that, you don't hurt people. Is that true?"

"No, or at least I try not to. I'm sorry." I was crying. "I never meant to bring you guys into this. I should just kill myself so I don't cause any more problems."

"That would be incredibly wrong." she said.

She was seriously scared of me, but she still came over and sat on the edge of the bed. That meant a lot to me. Nobody ever cared enough to stick around when they were scared. Not since my parents were killed, anyway.

"Brynne, I don't think you're a bad person, or a monster, or evil, or any of those other things Jessica said you're worried people will think about you."

"You don't?"

"No. I know you too well, honey. You're a good person, you're just different. But God has a plan for you, I'm sure."

"Thanks."

"Let's see how those cuts are doing." she said. She pulled the sheet down and peeled back some of the bandages. "Wow. At this rate you'll be all better in just a few days. I thought you would die through the night. How do you feel?'

"Really weak."

"Jess said you'd probably need something to eat." She took a

breath and sighed. “Or drink, I guess?”

“She did?” She got the blood from my refrigerator?

“Her and Barney went to your house and got a few things. I’ll have her bring up your breakfast. Try not to get any of the blood on the sheets, okay?”

“They went to my house? No, that’s too dangerous, they can’t do that.”

“They’re fine now. You just relax.”

I tried to get up, but I couldn’t do it. I wonder how much blood I lost. I don’t think I’ve ever been this weak before. This is bad. I can’t protect them if the others come back.

“Hey B.” Jessica said. She bounced over to my side with a huge smile. “How are you feeling?”

“Not great. But I’m alive, thanks to you.”

“Would you have died?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” She has the packet of blood in her hand, and I see it make an appearance every few seconds, before it dips back below her leg again. “Jess?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you please stop waving that around in front of me.”

“Oh, sorry!” She jumped up and went to her desk, where she grabbed some scissors. She snipped a little hole in the packet and shoved a straw into it. “Here you go, honey.”

She held it out toward me, but I couldn’t lift my arm to grab it. I’m weaker than I thought. She must have seen me struggling, because she moved closer and held the blood near my mouth and she shoved the straw between my lips.

“First time I’ve ever used a straw.” I said between sips.

“What, so you’re not a civilized va... blood drinker?”

“This is a little like a juice pack.” I sucked the last of it out. “Crap.”

“That was all that was in your fridge, Brynne. I’m sorry if it’s not enough.”

“No, it... thanks.”

“Is there any way at all that I can get more? I mean I know you can probably just go in and steal it, but I can’t do that, and you’re not up to it right now.”

“I’ll be okay. Maybe a sandwich, if it’s not too much trouble?”

“Yeah, absolutely.” She dropped the empty blood packet in the trash. “I have something else for you, too.” She opened the drawer of the nightstand. “Here you go.”

“Jenna!”

“I figured she’d make you feel better.”

“I...” I couldn’t raise my arms to grab her. “I... can’t...”

“Shh, it’s okay.” She brushed the hair back from my forehead, then

she nestled the doll in next to my side. “Don’t cry, honey, it’s going to be alright.”

Jessica headed down to get my sandwich. I could hear her in the kitchen. I could also hear a very definite quiet, which is out of place in this house. They’re always lively and vibrant and noisy.

“They’re scared of me, Jenna.” I said. It felt so bad to not be able to lift her up and look at her. “I can’t blame them. If they were smart they would have shoved me out the door and let me die. If they were smart they’d take a big knife and chop my head off while I’m too weak to do anything about it. I wouldn’t really fight it anyway.”

Jessica is still down there, making a sandwich. This is apparently going to be the most elaborate sandwich of all time. And so now this is Barney coming down the hall, I guess.

“Are you alive?” he asked.

“Yeah. Sort of.”

“So how many people have you killed? A lot? Do you tear their limbs off and suck the blood from their protruding stumps? Are you vicious and like a savage? Do you bite their neck and drink directly from them?”

“No.”

So that’s what he thinks I am? This really isn’t going to work. Somehow I have got to find a way to get out of here. I don’t even care about what happens to me at this point, but these people really hate what I am. They’re playing nice, or at least Mrs. Sloan and Jess are, but they really don’t want me here.

“So how old are you really?” he asked.

“That depends on how you mean that.” I can’t even roll over and look away from him. Oh yeah, and my doll is right here, and I really want to look like a little kid around people. I guess I don’t care so much about that, though. I love Jenna far more than I care about what he thinks. “Are you asking how old I am physically and mentally and emotionally, or what year I was born?”

“What year were you born?”

“Eighteen fifty-six.”

“Holy crap, you’re old.” he said. He laughed. “So Jessica said you age really slowly. So keeping that in mind, how old are you?”

“Um, like, fifteen.”

“Man, you’re just a kid.”

“Yeah.”

“You're jailbait.”

“Huh?”

“Uh, never mind.”

He retreated down the hallway. Jailbait? What a jerk. Typical.

“A sandwich fit for a queen.” Jess said. She sat the plate on my

stomach, but removed it when I winced. “Still sore, huh? Anyway, how do you want to do this?”

“You know what, I’ll just get it myself. Just sit it on the nightstand and go.”

“No, I can hold it up for you, that’s okay.”

“I don’t need someone to feed me!”

“O-K.”

What is happening to me? I just snap at her when she’s trying to help, and all this crying lately, it’s just not me. And she’s trying to help! She’s my only real friend, and I’m taking this all out on her. She’s going to hate me. She’s going to wonder why she didn’t just let me die.

“You should have.” I said. “Let me die.”

“Get over it, you’re still alive. Damn, what a freakin' nightmare.”

“Jess, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful.”

“Brynne, I know you’re not feeling well, it’s okay. Now open up.” She held a wedge of sandwich toward my mouth. “And no fingers.” she joked.

It is so humiliating to have her feed me. I’ve never been this low in my life. I never have had to be fed. And by *her*! Humiliating.

“Would some Tylenol even help?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“Honey, you’ve got to be in a lot of pain. I can get you some Tylenol. I’m sorry, but we don’t have anything stronger than that.”

“Um, maybe. It’s really not so bad, as long as I don’t move.”

“There’s no reason to be tough, Brynne, you don’t have to put up a front right now. If you’re hurting I can get you something.”

“Um... okay.”

“I’ll go grab a couple of Tylenol and we can finish eating when I get back, okay?”

“Um... can you get... like eight.”

“Eight? Seriously?”

“It takes more than usual to have an effect on me.”

She brought the Tylenol in and stuck it in my mouth and dumped water in behind it. I want to move. I want so badly to be able to move my arms, at least. I’ve never been in such a sad state. Every time I try to budge my arms I can’t even stand the pain.

And now there’s another problem. I don’t think I’ve cried this much in a century. Just hold it in, Brynne. Just stop thinking about it. I can’t. This is so humiliating.

“Honey, you’re going to be okay.” she said, trying to comfort me.

“I hate this.”

“The way you heal, you’re going to be better in no time. Just try to sleep.”

"No, Jessica, I have to pee."

"Oh. Um,"

"Can you help me to the bathroom?"

"Yeah, absolutely." She pulled at the blanket that was covering me, then stopped. "Yeah, we really can't drag you down the hall naked, can we?"

"Which makes me wonder why I have no clothes on."

"They were so torn up, Brynne, and full of blood."

"But... I mean you went to my house."

"I brought some. But you have cuts all over. Maybe I'll just get a towel and wrap it around you, okay?"

She got a towel and pulled the covers back and wrapped the towel around me. It hurt *so bad* when she pushed me up on my side to shove the towel under me. And then she pulled me from the bed and to a standing position.

"Ow, ow, ow." I said. She sat me back down. "I can't... Jess, I can't do it."

"Hey, it's okay. I just can't lift you by myself."

"I'm not strong enough to stand."

"Don't cry, okay. Just relax. Oh, but not too much, not yet. I really don't want to have to clean that up if we can avoid it."

"I have to go."

"Hang on, I'll just get some help, okay."

She went into the hall and started shouting for Barney. When I told her no, she told me he was the only one home. I didn't hear her parents leave. How could I not have heard them leave? I guess I have been sort of out of it, but still it seems hard to believe.

Barney came in and they picked me up, and it still hurt so bad I could hardly stand it. They carried me into the restroom, and I was just dreading the idea of peeing in front of him, but they sat me on the edge of the toilet, then he disappeared. Jess helped me from there. It was so horrible. And then they put me back in bed.

"You look exhausted." she said.

"Uh-huh."

"Try to sleep, hon." She wiped the sweat from my forehead. "Brynne, you need more blood. How do we get more?"

"You can't."

"What if we just ask the hospital?"

"Right, 'cause they'll just hand over blood. Sure."

"Well I don't know!"

"Jess, you can't. I'll be okay."

"I think you'd be okay quicker if you had blood." she said.

"Well I don't have any, so that point is moot."

"Yeah. Maybe I can steal some from a blood bank, like you do."

“No! Jess, you’re not doing that.”

“I’d probably be caught, anyway. We’ll think of something. Just get some rest, okay.”

“Jess, don’t do anything. Please.”

“Relax, I’m not going to go steal blood. Just rest.”

“Jess,”

“I said I’m not doing anything.”

“No, could... could you, um, give me Jenna?” It’s so embarrassing, but it makes me feel better to have her with me.

“Oh,” She smiled and grabbed the doll. “You’re so cute, with your little doll.”

“Sto-op. I can’t help it.”

“Relax,” She tucked the doll in next to me. “You’re just a kid, it’s okay.” She actually kissed my forehead. “You two sleep tight, okay.”

“Thanks Jess.”

I dreamed about relaxing in their backyard, laying in the sun with Jessica while Barney grilled and Mr. And Mrs. Sloan sat on the glider reading the newspaper. I wasn’t burning, I wasn’t hurrying to the shade, I was getting a sun tan. The first one since eighteen seventy-one.

“Brynne.” I heard someone saying my name. “Brynne, wake up.”

“Wha... um...” I said, brilliantly.

“Brynne, wake up.” Mrs. Sloan said. “Wake up, honey.”

“I’m awake. What’s going on?”

“I want you to drink this.” she said.

I looked down at what she was holding. A sports bottle full of blood. How did they get this? Is it human? Animal blood doesn’t work. But I can smell it now, and it smells human.

“Where... Jess promised she wouldn’t try to steal...”

“She didn’t.” Mrs. Sloan held up her arm to show me a bandage. “We each gave a little.”

“You guys shouldn’t have done that.”

“Just drink it.”

That’s so sweet of them. That’s so amazing. If I were stronger I would tell them no, I would go away. They don’t even know anything about my kind. What if I like their flavor and decide to get more, only this time directly from the source? They can’t know that I won’t.

“Why are you doing this for me?” I took a drink.

“What should we do, let you die?”

“I don’t think I’d die now. Not if you just gave me normal food. I’d just take a long time to heal.”

“Well, Jessica thought you’d heal faster this way. Will you?”

“Probably. I’ve never been this hurt, so it’s hard to say.” I took another sip.

“We want to get you healthy as soon you can.”

“Me too. And then I can stop imposing on you.”

“What would you do? You can’t honestly think it’s a good idea to go back to your house and stay there now.” She sounds worried.

“I have to go away, Mrs. Sloan.”

“That would make Jessica very unhappy.” she said. “We’d all miss you.”

“I don’t know what else to do. And I can’t stay around Hanton. As long as I’m here, you’re all in danger. They might come back for me.”

“But if you’re here, with us, then they face a house full of people willing to use firearms to protect you.” she said. “Jessica said bullets work well on your kind.”

“They won’t usually kill us.” I told her, between sips. “But they will hurt us.” At least me. I assume it’ll hurt the others, too.

“Then you should stay here for a while, until you know you’re safe.”

“I don’t like putting you at risk.”

“I don’t like the idea of a fifteen year old living alone.” she said.

“Mrs. Sloan, I’ve been living alone longer than the combined time your entire family has been alive.”

“Sounds like it would be lonely.” she said. She took the empty bottle away. “And I don’t care if you’ve been alive for over a hundred and fifty years, you’re still just a little girl. You said it, you don’t age.”

“I’m fine by myself.”

“I don’t believe that. And I don’t think you want that, either.” She took a tissue and wiped around my mouth. “There’s more in the refrigerator downstairs when you want it.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.” I told her. “But thanks.”

“Get some more rest, honey.” She paused on her way out the door. “You being a vampire explains so much.”

“I’m not…”

“Sorry.” she said. “I know you’re sensitive about that. But being what you are, it makes sense now. We’ve been worried about you. I was thinking of calling your mother to see if there was some medical condition we should know about. I’ve noticed you’re small for your age. Especially when that age was supposed to be seventeen. You don’t even look fifteen, most of the time.”

“I wasn’t really the most healthy girl before he changed me.”

“Well what all was wrong with you?”

“In the past couple of years before that I had typhoid, dysentery, and pneumonia twice. Back then medical treatments weren’t quite like now. I didn’t even see a doctor any of those times.”

“It’s a wonder you survived. I guess you were a tough little girl even when you were just a normal human.”

Monday, May 23

I had been dreaming of a normal life. I could see myself at eighteen or nineteen, married

to a farmer, or maybe a shop keeper from town. Having a little girl, who I named Jenna, who was perfect and beautiful and had hair that is a brighter red than mine.

As much as I liked that dream, it wasn't what I would want. First of all, I don't want to marry a farmer or shop keeper. Especially not any of the ones from the eighteen hundreds. I'm actually more of a modern girl, really. Maybe once you've seen progress you can't go back.

The little girl in the dream was absolutely the most beautiful child I have ever seen. And I wanted to guide her and help her grow up. But then I think of the responsibility of that, and I just don't think I could do it. Not now, especially, but not even if I had grown up normally. Maybe I would have been ready at nineteen or twenty, I don't know, but I doubt it. I know I'd never be interested in the guy in the dream. Or any others, for that matter.

"Are you feeling any better?" Jessica asked. She was washing my face with a damp cloth.

"Ugh. I just woke up." I tried moving my arms, and it still hurt. But not as bad. "Maybe a little better."

"I brought you breakfast." she said. She moved another bottle of blood back and forth in front of me. "You hungry?"

"You guys really shouldn't be doing that."

"Well this is the last of it for now. Mom is worried about how much we can each give without having bad health effects for us."

"She's right, you shouldn't put yourselves at risk."

"I personally think I could spare another pint."

"No, Jess. You can't do that."

"Hey, I think I've proven I'll do anything for you, so don't tell me I can't give a little blood."

"Please don't. I'd feel bad. And this right here will help a lot. Really."

"I hope so. Well, I gotta get to school. Barney is around, and he'll check on you later." She stuck her cell phone in my hand. "If you need anything, just hit send and it'll call his phone, so he can come running. Sort of like the old bell trick, except you don't need to move your arm."

"Jessica, um, thanks."

"You're welcome, honey." She kissed my forehead. "Don't cry, Brynne, this is all going to be okay."

She scooted Jenna up tight against my side, then she adjusted the

covers and headed out. And I laid there, staring at the bottle of blood sitting on the nightstand. Great. And it'll go bad if I leave it sitting there for more than a couple of hours. Maybe I should call Barney.

"Jenna, can I do this?" She didn't answer. "I think I can. At least I can try."

I pushed with my right leg and right arm, trying to roll myself over onto my left side. It hurt. It hurt really, really bad. But I did it. I had to rest for a few minutes before I could reach out with my right arm to try to get the blood. And when I picked up the bottle, I was almost not strong enough to hold it up to bring it back over to my mouth. I had to rest again before I could drink it.

I woke up with Barney standing over me. He had a wash cloth and reached down and wiped my face. I saw the sports bottle that had contained the blood in his other hand.

"You okay?" he asked. "You had blood on your cheek."

"Oh." Well it was sort of nice of him to wipe it off, I guess. "Thanks."

"Do you need anything? Some pain killers, something to drink, anything?"

"No, but thank you."

"Do you want help moving into a different position or anything? You don't look too comfortable."

"Um, I think I can do it."

I pushed with my leg, and leaned back. It hurt, but I did roll onto my back. Right on top of my doll. And it hurt where she was pushing.

"Can... you get my doll out from under me?" I asked. This is humiliating.

"Oh, yeah, sure."

He went around to the other side of the bed and very carefully lifted the covers, being very careful to keep my chest covered. He reached under and slid Jenna out, pausing and apologizing when I winced. He tucked her up under my arm.

"You good?"

"Yes, thank you Barney."

"Well if you need anything, I'll be around."

"Thank you. What time is it?"

"A little after noon. If you want some lunch I can see if I can whip something up."

"No thanks, I just want to go back to sleep."

"Well, sweet dreams then." he said.

Did Jessica threaten him to be nice to me? No, I think he was genuinely being sweet. And he doesn't seem quite as scared of me. Maybe he realized I could barely move after Jessica had to have him help carry me to the bathroom.

I laid there for a while before drifting off, thinking about how the others attacked me. They could have killed me at any time. They wouldn't have bothered with salt if that was their intention. No, they wanted me to suffer and die a slower death. So all along they were going to leave me there to die, they just didn't expect Jessica to interrupt them. If she had been just a few minutes later then maybe they wouldn't have known someone came and saved me, they would think I died the slow torturous death they intended, and they would never have come back. But now they will, I'm afraid. How do I protect Jess?

I woke up later on, and I could smell the meatloaf they were cooking. Or had cooked, because I could hear them eating and talking. I reached over with my left arm to adjust where Jenna was laying. It hurt, but not as bad as before.

“I’ll be careful.” Jessica said. They were sitting at the dining room table, I think.

“We’ll take a gun.” Barney said.

“I don’t like this idea one bit.” their mother told them. “I don’t see why you insist...”

“Because she needs her things, Mom.” Jess argued. “And those people probably aren’t even around.”

“*Probably*.” her dad said. “I don’t like that.”

“We’ll be careful.”

“If you insist on this, I’m going along.” he told her.

They’re going to my house to get things. I don’t need that. That can wait until I’m capable of doing it myself. That may be a while, but it can wait.

Only there’s really no way for me to make that point to them right now. I’m not really able to shout loud enough for them to hear me, and Jessica’s phone is gone now. She must have came up and taken it when she got home. They probably wouldn’t listen to me if I did tell them to wait. At least Jess wouldn’t. And while I was trying to figure out how to stop her, I guess I drifted back to sleep.

There was a banging sound and I woke, instinctively sitting up. And then I let out a yell, because it hurt so bad. I was seeing spots, and I knew I didn’t dare move again for a minute. Everything was pain. And as it faded, after what seemed an eternity, Jessica was hugging me.

“Wow that hurt.” I said.

“Are you okay now?”

“Yeah. Can you lay me back? Wait, just wait a minute.”

I looked around the room, at all my things that they obviously risked their lives to get. Some of my art was on one wall, a rack full of my clothes were in one corner. I could see my purse sitting on the

edge of Jessica's dresser.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It's your room too, now, so I figured you would want some of your artwork."

"My room... what are you talking about?"

"Mom and Dad said you were moving in." Barney explained.

"What?"

Jess said "Mom told me she talked to you about this."

"No. Huh-uh. Not that I remember. The only thing we talked about was her insisting I stay here a few days while I recover. It won't be that long, maybe a week at the most." Hopefully. "You don't have to do this."

"But I want you here." she said.

"Jess, that's great, but I can't put you guys at risk."

"Honey, we're not letting you put yourself at risk just to protect us."

"There's safety in numbers." Barney said.

"Yeah. So you're buying some bunk beds." Jess told me. "You've apparently got loads of money, and I'm not sharing a bed with you. I need my space. And this room isn't big enough for two regular beds."

"I... okay."

"And I get the bottom bunk. I'm older."

"You're not."

"Yes, I am." she insisted. "Remember, you're just fifteen."

"I'm a hundred and..."

"I don't care what year you were born, you're still just fifteen. Basically."

She laid me back in the bed. It hurt, but I managed not to yell or scream. I managed to wrap my arm around Jenna when she placed the doll against my side. I am getting better. I still really hurt.

"Is there anything else you want from your house?" Barney asked me.

"No, guys, thanks, but you don't need to go back there."

"What are you doing with all your stuff, then?"

"I'll leave it there. I mean I'm stilling paying rent on the place, so I can leave stuff there with no problem."

"Why pay rent?" Jess asked. "Seriously, just shove what you want to keep in a storage unit somewhere and get rid of the house."

"I just want to keep my options open."

"I'm hurt that you think you won't want to stay here."

"Jess,"

"I'm just joking, honey." She laughed and patted my arm.

"So I've been thinking," Barney said.

"Always a bad sign." Jessica told him.

“Shut up. Anyway, Brynne, I can overlook you being a... an eternal,” he said, and he shot a quick glance at Jess, like she had been warning him or something. “And you’re not *really* fifteen, so...”

“Barney, leave the poor girl alone.”

“So we should go out sometime. When you’re feeling better.” he said.

“Oh,” It took him all this time to get the nerve to say anything and he does it now? He still sort of creeps me out, even if he has been sort of sweet the last couple of days. “I’m sorry.” I said.

“See. I told you she wasn’t interested.” Jess said. “Do you have that out of your system now?”

“Are you sure?” he asked me.

“It’s just... you're my best friend's brother, and it just would be weird, that’s all. I mean brother's are off limits.”

“Oh.” he said. His smile dropped off of his face. “Sure, I get it.”

He left the room and I let out a sigh in relief. That was bad. That was way bad. I hate letting people down, but I can’t just go out with everyone who asks. Not that I get asked a lot. Barney does sort of creep me out, and he is Jessica's brother. What was I supposed to say, ‘Eww gross, you stupid freak’?

“I’m so sorry about my brother.”

“That’s okay.”

“So you want some dinner? I mean it’s just meatloaf, not blood, but it was really good meatloaf.”

“Sure, that would be great, Jess. Thanks.”

She brought me a plate full of food. She helped me into a seating position again and waited for me to try to feed myself before she grabbed the fork and started feeding me.

“This is so humiliating.” I said, between bites and with tears running down my face.

“You’d do it for me if I was hurt and needed you to.”

“I have never felt this helpless.”

“Honey, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

We finished the humiliating ordeal of her feeding me. That is so awful. You don’t know what helpless is until you have to have someone feed you. And when she was done, she asked me if my tummy was full, then ruffled my hair when she left the room. She’s treating me like a little child.

I laid there, staring at the ceiling and hugging my doll tightly to my chest. I’m going to have to go to the bathroom soon. I guess having to have help using the bathroom is worse than being fed.

“Jenna, this is horrible. It is so horrible that it’s almost funny. I mean I’m stronger than anyone in this house, by a long shot, when I’m not hurt so badly. And yet I have to completely rely on them. This

sucks."

I waited for Jessica to come back up. I waited for a very long time, and I was starting to worry that she wouldn't make it back in time. And when she did, she had two ice-cream cones.

"Hope you like vanilla."

"Um, Jess, I need to use the restroom."

"Oh, okay. Let me... let's see if I can set these down."

She set them on the dresser. They're flat on the bottom, and they'll probably stand up for a while, but they are going to drip on her dresser a lot before we get back.

She started to go for Barney, but I told her I thought we could do it without him this time. It's too embarrassing to have him help me. And so we did make it to the bathroom. I was crying by the time we got there, and not because of humiliation this time, but because it hurt so badly.

When we finished and she returned me to the room, I had her sit me on the end of the bed so I could rest for a minute. Then she helped me dress. Rather, she dressed me. In an actual dress, too. I thought it would be easier to get on and it wouldn't rub against any of my cuts too badly. They're all sort of scabbed and crusty now anyway, but I didn't want to take any chances. Plus it'll be easier to go to the restroom next time.

She picked up the remains of the ice-cream cones, wiped up the mess, and ate what was left of hers. She offered me the one they got for me, but I didn't want it.

"Can you take my debit card from my purse?" I asked her. "The PIN number is 1856. If someone is getting new bunk beds then they'll need money. And get something for yourself, like some new shoes or something."

"I have shoes."

"Go get some nice heels. And a new dress or two, if you want. Or some jewelry, or a new purse, or anything. Get a new phone, or a new television if you want."

"You don't need to buy me things, Hon." she said. She hugged me. "But I appreciate the offer."

"Last I checked, I had something like seven and a half million dollars in the bank. And I never really had anyone to share it with before, ya know?"

"Are... you're serious!" Her mouth was open for a moment and her eyes were wide. "Wow, I knew you said you were rich, but... how? How can you have that much money?"

"I bought stock in Microsoft, IBM, Apple, and just almost every other electronics company I could. I had a lot more, but I had a lot of stocks that went down the toilet when the economy fell apart a few

years ago."

"But... I mean holy freakin' crap, Brynne!"

She hung out with me, chatting, until I was tired. Then she turned out the light so I could get some sleep.

"Where are you sleeping?" I asked.

"On the sofa."

"I could sleep there and you could have your bed back, if you will help me down there."

"That's okay, honey. I'm fine. And maybe Dad will get the bunk beds tomorrow and we'll both be in here."

"I'm not sure I could make it to the top bunk right now."

"I can sleep on the top for a few days. And then as soon as your better we can switch, 'cause I don't want the top bunk."

Tuesday, May 24

I woke up and actually managed to roll over and look at the clock without feeling too

horrible. It hurt, but it was bearable. Ten after nine, so Jess would be at school already. So I guess I'm on my own for the bathroom, 'cause I'm not asking Barney for help.

I rolled a little farther, then pushed myself into an upright, seated position on the side of the bed. Gosh it hurt, but I can take some pain.

"Jenna, this is going to be bad, but here goes."

I leaned forward and stood up. Ripping pain shot through my legs and up my stomach and chest. I almost sat back down, or fell down, but I didn't. Instead I stopped and took a deep breath and then walked, very slowly, toward the restroom. It hurt *so* bad, but I made it.

By the time I was back in bed I was so exhausted that I couldn't stay awake. But it was a huge improvement.

I woke a few hours later and, though I knew it would hurt, I forced myself out of bed to try to walk around again. I took Jenna with me this time. They can make fun of me all they want, it's comforting to have her with me.

I stood at the top of the stairs, contemplating a descent. After about five minutes, I decided I should at least try it. I made it down five steps, then stopped and sat for a while. After resting, I made it the rest of the way to the bottom.

I made my way into the kitchen, where Barney was cooking something that looked roughly like chilli. It smelled really good, too. I sat at the table, glad to be up, but also really, really out of energy.

"Is there enough that I can have some?" I asked. He jumped, then spun and looked at me.

"What are you doing up? Holy crap, you scared the hell out of me."

"I'm getting a little better. It was hard, but I made it down here."

"Let me get you a bowl."

He got another bowl down and filled it and sat it in front of me. He got a glass of milk for me, and I didn't even ask. And he got the ketchup. I don't know how he knew, but I do like ketchup in my chilli.

I had to stop every few bites, but I managed to finish my food. It was really nice of him to get me all that, but I still don't want to ask for his help to get back up the stairs. I really didn't think this through before coming down. How am I getting back up there?

"Um, I'm going to take a nap on the sofa." I said.

"You want me to go get you a blanket or pillow or anything?"

"I'll be okay. Thanks, Barney."

I laid down on the sofa. When I woke up the television was on. Before I opened my eyes I sort of took inventory of everything. Still hurt, but I feel a little better. Let's see, there's a blanket over me. Barney must have gotten it anyway, once I fell asleep.

"Hi." I said. Mrs. Sloan is sitting in the chair across from me.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. "Did you sleep well?"

"I guess. I feel a lot better."

I worked my way painfully into a seated position. I was still chilled, so I pulled the blanket up over me and hugged my doll tightly against me.

"Where is everyone?"

"Barney is over at his friends' house. Ted and Jessica are out getting burgers. Jess said she knows what kind you like."

"Yeah, I eat at the diner a lot." I told her.

"She's supposed to be working tonight, but she wanted to stay home with you."

"Oh." Great, one more thing for me to feel bad about. "Well, if she wants to quit... I mean I have a lot of money, and I don't mind sharing some of it. I just... never did before because that job means a lot to her."

"She's an independent girl."

"She is."

She very much is. Independent. And stubborn. Like she's the kind of girl that would stick by a friend, even when everything in the world says you shouldn't. Stubborn and independent like she makes up her own mind and then changes other people's minds by force of her will. Like convincing her family to not call an ambulance, because the chopped up best friend is a vampire, or something like it.

"Why are you letting me stay here?" I asked her. "Jess told you what I am, you know what I am, and you know that I've killed people."

"So you *have* killed people?" she asked. Her voice is a little shaky. "Jess said you don't do that."

"Not in a very long time."

"I have a hard time picturing the gentle, tiny little girl that I know as a killer."

"I never meant to."

"So how many?" she asked tentatively.

"Do you really want to know this, Mrs. Sloan?"

"If you're going to be living here, I think I deserve to know. And I think you should call me Peggy."

"When Alejandro changed me I just did what he said. I didn't know anything, and I had no clue what to do at all. So back then it was... I had to get blood from the source."

“Do you grow fangs?” she asked, completely seriously.

“No. I have to cut with something. But I can just bite with my teeth, if I need to. Just no fangs. And it heals. You can see what Jessica’s finger did.” I never really like thinking about this. “But at first I didn’t know when or how to stop after just a little, and I drank too much from the first two.”

“I thought you said four?”

“A few years after that, I was walking along a road at night and this carriage, this horse pulled wagon, came up beside me and this guy grabbed me and shoved me into this wagon. He was really drunk. His hands were all over me, and I shoved him away. And he fell from the wagon and broke his neck.”

“Well that was self defense, honey.”

“Yes. And then just after the turn of the century, the twentieth century, I was caught by this guy in an alley. He saw me, he figured out what I was.”

“So you killed him? Brynne, I don’t understand this at all. I can’t imagine you doing something like that.”

“Not on purpose. I was going to run, but he came at me with a knife, and in the fight I twisted it around and he ended up… I stabbed him in the chest. And then I got scared and ran off.”

“Self defense again.” she said. Then after a pause “So why did you run off? I mean it seems gruesome to me, but I would imagine it’s an easy meal, right?”

“What if someone came by? Ninety pound little girls aren’t supposed to be able to wrestle down a three hundred pound man.”

She was tensed up, her muscles all drawn up tight and her breathing accelerated. She really understands the awful things I’m capable of now, I think. How awful I really am.

“I never asked for this.” I said. I sniffled and closed my eyes to try to hold back the tears. “I have spent so many nights wishing that it had been me that he killed instead of the rest of my family. Or even *with* the rest of them. But what am I supposed to do, give up and starve to death? I tried that, and it’s just too hard. I can’t help being a monster.”

“You’re not a monster.” she insisted. “You’ve done the best you can with the hand life has dealt you.”

“I killed people.” I said, dipping my head in shame.

“When you didn’t know better and in self defense.”

“That doesn’t forgive it.” I said, barely above a whisper. “I shouldn’t even exist. And I always thought I was the last, that eventually I’d die and that would be it, but apparently there are a lot of us. So he lied to me about that, too. Like almost everything.”

“Brynne, I think beating yourself up about this for what, a century?

is enough punishment for any wrongs you may have done."

She's willing to forgive me. Why is it they're all so calm about this? I don't think anyone else would just handle having someone sort of like a vampire showing up with their daughter as well as they are handling it.

"Jessica said you have some talents."

"Um, yeah." I don't want to do this, but she deserves to know anything she wants to.

"What kind of talents do you have?"

"I'm sort of fast, and I can run for hours without resting. I'm strong. Not super human strong, but very strong. Stronger than almost anyone in town, I guess. My eyesight is better than any normal human, by a long shot. I heal, which you've noticed. And then I can hear really well."

"Is that it?"

"Pretty much." Good grief, what does she want? Does she think I should be able to turn into a bat and fly away?

"How well do you see?"

"I can probably read the newspaper from a block away."

"Okay," she said, smiling. "That *is* good." she said. "How about your hearing?"

"I... it's good. Like at home I insulated extra just so I could sleep. And I'm really sorry about this, it's not like I have a choice, but when I'm here you don't really have any secrets. I just can't stop hearing."

"So you hear all our conversations?" she asked. She sighed and gave me a very frustrated look.

"Pretty much. I always try to ignore it, though. Usually, anyway. I was sort of listening that time when I cut my hand when slicing watermelon. Jess and I were in the bathroom, and I heard your discussion."

"I don't even remember what we were talking about."

"Me. That's sort of why I was having a hard time ignoring it. Barney was speculating that I was gay, and Mr. Sloan was wondering why I don't have a boyfriend."

"Oh yes, I remember that now." She looked away, a little embarrassed.

"But now you know why."

"You could still date."

"For a few months. And then I'd have to break up with them." Plus, Barney was right.

Jess and her dad came back with the burgers. They usually eat in the dining room, but tonight we ate in the living room. At least I was able to feed myself. The fries were especially good.

I noticed that the newspaper Mr. Sloan had was always being

shuffled away from me. After a while I got a peek at a headline about another victim whose blood was drained. I have to do something when I'm healed.

I had to have help to make it up the stairs. I was able to walk to the stairs, but I just didn't have the strength to go up. And once Jess helped me to the top, we sat on the top step so I could rest.

When I was able to continue, she helped me into her room. It's our room now, I guess. At least for the time being. And there are bunk beds set up where the other bed was. I can't believe I slept through those being delivered and set up.

"I got you something today." Jess said. "Well, *you* got you something." She held out a pair of earplugs on a string. "Maybe they'll help you sleep."

"I've been sleeping pretty well."

"Because you're sick. When you get better, you will definitely want those."

"Thank you."

"You're so lucky." she said. She watched as I gingerly sat on the edge of the bottom bunk. "You don't have to go to school tomorrow."

"It's the last day. Who doesn't like going the last day."

"Me. We actually have a final in my math class. That sucks."

"Sorry, Jess."

"Anyway, you have some cash leftover." She pulled several twenties from her back pocket. "Like, two-fifty, almost."

"Oh. Just hang on to if for now." I told her.

"Yeah, okay. So how much money do you think you have in the bank?"

"In that account? About twenty thousand."

"Twenty-eight."

"Oh, okay. Whatever." It's only money.

"I have to work, and you just have all this cash." she whined.

"Well you can quit working, I'll help pay for stuff."

"No," She sighed. "That's okay. Hey, maybe Michael would give you a job too, then we could work together."

"There are just so many things wrong with that." I said, smiling. "I need to get to sleep, I'm tired."

"Goodnight, hon. And goodnight, Jenna." she said.

Thursday, May 26

Jess slept in. It's the first day of summer break, so why not sleep in? So I was up before her, and I was feeling so much better than before. I took a shower, dressed in my favorite cute skirt, then went down and made Jess Breakfast. Okay, so it was almost eleven by then, so it was more like early lunch.

"Wakey wakey." I said.

"What is this?" she asked. She was staring, bleary eyed, at the tray I was carrying.

"Breakfast in bed."

"Aw, honey, that's sweet."

"I figure you've done a lot for me, you deserve something like this."

"Well thank you."

She climbed down from the top bunk and sat on the bottom one so she could eat. I sat next to her and watched. It was interesting. I've never really paid a lot of attention to how she eats. So dainty.

"You look better today." she said.

"I feel a lot better. I have a ways to go, but I'm getting there."

"Good. So," She nibbled the edge of some toast. "Do you think you'll feel up to going on a shopping trip with me and Tony in Kansas City tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Probably." I do love shopping.

"Good. His cousin is coming along, and it gets awkward with a third person sometimes."

"So you two are going to wander off and stick me with Andre again?" Great. "Look, Andre was an okay guy, I guess, but I just wasn't feeling it. I wish you'd stop trying to set me up with him."

"No, it's not Andre. Andre's little sister, Teresa. She has been begging for someone to take her shopping. She's like really into clothes and stuff, you two will probably be best friends."

"*You're* my best friend."

"Yeah," She reached up and ruffled my hair. "But she's the same age as you."

"So you're going to do this? Treat me like a little kid now? Great Jess. Thanks."

Is she always going to treat me like a child? Try to push me off on other people, so she doesn't have to babysit? We'll never have the same kind of friendship we had before, will we?

"Hey, I didn't mean anything by it." She sat the plate down and leaned over and hugged me, being gentle because I'm still pretty sore. "You're my best friend, and you always will be. When I make comments about you being young, it doesn't change any of that."

“I’ve been alive a lot longer than you.” I said, fighting back tears.

“But you’re physically and mentally a fifteen year old, right? That’s what you keep saying. Look, that doesn’t mean anything, it’s just a fact. All I’m saying... look, you were the one who said I’d have friends my own age. All I’m saying is it’s okay if you have other friends, too. It won’t change anything with us, honey.”

“Whatever.”

“Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad.”

“You look mad. And you’re about two seconds away from crying.”

“No I’m not!” A tear escaped and ran down my cheek. “I’m just frustrated, okay!”

“I know.”

“You don’t. Okay, so... so like everyone thinks maturity comes with life experience, but it’s not true. I have more life experience than anyone, and... and I still have stupid impulsive thoughts, I still feel really depressed and sad when things don’t go my way, I still have stupid little things make me really happy, and I... but I mean... I mean I was sort of an immature girl when I was normal, or with my family, or whatever.”

“Brynne, it’s okay. You will eventually get there. So many people would love to age slowly, like you do.”

“Well I’d trade places with them any day. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone. It sucks to never get to be normal, never get to grow up.”

“I’m sorry.”

She’s sorry. Only I’m the one who should be sorry. I whine about this, but it’s just because she was teasing me a little. Still, it hurts my feelings a little that she thinks of me as a kid now. We’ve always been equals, and the second she finds out I don’t really age and that I’m actually younger, she starts acting like I’m a little girl.

But I am. I still play with my dolls, I still feel scared of everything, even though I have very few things I really need to fear, there’s just so many things. I know I have to be okay with that, but it hurts that she’s outgrowing me. One day she won’t want me around. I don't want to think about life without her, though.

“Sorry I’m such a downer. I just... I’m sorry.”

I got up and hurried to the bathroom before she saw me crying any more. I hate crying. I’ve cried so much in the past couple of weeks that I think I’m starting to go insane. I’ve never been this emotional. I’ve never let myself be. At least not outwardly.

When I was done crying in the bathroom, I came back out and found Jess changing the sheets on the bunk bed. And she moved her pillow and blanket to the bottom bunk. I guess she figures I can make it to the top now.

“Where’s, um,” Where’s my doll. But oh, stop treating me like a little girl. Yeah, brilliant.

“She’s on the dresser.” she said, pointing sideways at it.

“Oh. Thanks.”

“Don’t be embarrassed.” she said. She’s still changing the sheet, not looking at me. “A lot of adults have teddy bears or dolls they can’t live without. I might tease you about it a little, Brynne, but I think it’s fine. Really, it’s okay.”

“Thanks.”

“So I’m going over to Tony’s in a while.” She reached out and nudged my arm. “Wanna come along?”

“Nah.” Seeing her date someone is too hard to look at right now. It just makes me feel that much lonelier. “I should probably rest up for our trip tomorrow. I’m still a little weak.”

“I can stay here if you need me to.”

“No, go ahead and go.”

“Brynne, what’s wrong? You’ve been in a weird mood ever since I got up. And you act mad at me. Did I do something?”

“No, nothing.” Except you're going to be with Tony, and I will be alone for the rest of my long, long life.

“You sure?” she asked. I nodded. “Okay then.” She pulled me into a hug. “The breakfast was really good. Thank you.”

I watched television all afternoon and through the evening. I ate with Mr. and Mrs. Sloan, --Barney was out again-- and I talked with them a little. Mrs. Sloan insisted on coming up with me so she could check on my cuts. They’re almost completely healed.

And then I decided to go for a walk. I haven’t been outside all week. I got dressed and grabbed Jenna. Usually I don’t take her, ‘cause I feel kind of silly walking around where people could see me with a doll. This time I had to have her. Just for my comfort. Nobody will see me.

“Where are you going?” Mr. Sloan asked. I was already reaching for the door. “It’s pretty late, Brynne.”

“It’s just ten thirty. I was going for a walk.”

“Be back by eleven.” he said.

“Um,” I don’t want to sound disrespectful, but I’m not used to being told what to do. “Why?”

“It’s your curfew.” he said.

“I... um... okay?”

I didn’t even go anywhere once I left the house, just around to the side. I sat in the dark, wondering how in the world he thinks he has a right to tell me what to do. But they are letting me stay in their house. Their house, their rules. And I think there may even be a law for children under 16. Here I am being treated like a child again.

I always ring the doorbell at their house, so I wasn't real comfortable just walking in. But it seemed odd to ring the bell, too. I stood there for a couple of minutes, arguing with myself, before I finally rang the bell.

"Did you lock yourself out?" Mr. Sloan asked when he opened the door.

"I wasn't sure... I mean... it's not my house."

"You live here, you don't have to ring the doorbell."

"I... wasn't sure." I repeated.

When she got home, Jess laughed at me when I told her about my curfew. She doesn't have one. So now that they know I'm developmentally fifteen (as good a way to describe it as any, I guess), they treat me like a fifteen year old. This is going to get really old.

Friday, May 27

We were up early, so we could be ready for our trip. Jess surprised me by asking me to

help her pick out something cute to wear, and then asking for help with her hair. She is not usually a girly girl at all. I mean it was fun and all, and great to see her like that, but knowing I didn't have anyone to dress up for made it hard.

“Why are you so nervous?” I heard Tony ask. They were on the front porch. I didn’t hear an answer, so I assume she shrugged or something. I assume it’s Teresa. “Just chill.”

I pulled my skirt straight, then reached up and fluffed Jessica’s hair up, it was flat on the back. I then shoved her through the bedroom door as the doorbell rang. Jess looked at me, asking without asking if I had heard them. I nodded.

“Jessica.” Mrs. Sloan shouted. She spun and saw us right behind her. “Oh!” She stepped back away from us. “Don’t do that! You scared me.”

“Sorry.” I said.

“Do you two need any extra money to take along?”

“Um, no Mrs. Sloan. Peggy.” I said. She knows I have a bunch of money.

“You girls have a good time.”

“Later.” Jess said.

“When will you be back?” Mrs. Sloan asked. Peggy. She did ask me to call her Peggy.

“Whenever.” Jess said.

“Late?”

“Probably.” Jess said, sounding irritated.

“Remember, you have to be back by eleven.”

Oh great, they’re still on this curfew thing. It’s sort of funny. I lived alone since before her great-grandparents were born, and she wants me to be in by eleven. Her and Mr. Sloan... Ted, they have this really peculiar view of me. Everyone thinks I’m a kid now. It’s annoying.

“I’m Teresa.” the girl who had been bouncing from one foot to the other said. She gave a little wave and smiled a little before averting her eyes.

“Hi. I’m Brynne.”

“Yeah, so now that everyone knows everyone else, can we get going?” Jess asked.

Please tell me everyone isn’t going to be in a bad mood all day. I don’t think I can handle that. I feel a lot better today than I have in previous days, and I’m pretty sure I have enough strength to take them all down.

Tony hurried to the car, and Jess climbed into the front with him. So I get to sit in back with my *new best friend*. Thanks Jessica, I really appreciate this. Ya know, I wonder if she is trying to find me a new friend so she doesn't have to spend much time with me.

On the two hour trip we played a game. Tony would switch the radio to a new station and then the first person to guess the singer would get a point, and then one point for the song title. Jess was awful at it. Tony wasn't much better. Teresa was beating me by quite a bit. I had thirty-five points, she had forty-three. At least I didn't have six, like Jess, or eight, like Tony.

I can't believe she beat me. The girl is good. She's a perky little thing, once she gets past her nervousness from being around new people. One of those bouncy, smiley people. She's got fashion sense, too.

"Where to first?" Jess asked. We were just inside the entrance to the mall.

"Ooh, over here." Teresa said. She was pointing toward a store with all sorts of trendy jewelry in the window.

"I want to go look for some new jeans." Jess said.

"So go." Teresa said. "Come on, Brynne."

She grabbed my hand and pulled me away from Jess and Tony. I shrugged and shook my head in Jess's direction, and she laughed as I disappeared into the crowd.

"OMG!" Teresa said. Yes, she actually spelled it out like that. She grabbed a necklace with pandas on it. "This is really cute."

"I guess."

"Oh, you should get this." she said. She grabbed a multi-stranded gold and silver necklace. It is pretty. She held it up to my neck. "Oh, this would look so good on you."

She kept on like that. She has so much energy, it's ridiculous. And she likes bows and ribbons. And she likes bows and ribbons *on me*. It's sort of weird. We went from store to store, picking out really girly frilly things, and laughing at silly things that didn't go together, and I had such a blast. I never had this with Jess. I love Jessica dearly, but she never filled my need for a girly friend. Jess is almost tomboyish.

We met up with Jess and Tony for lunch at the food court. They were there before us, and they had pizza. I headed across the to the pizza place and Teresa grabbed my hand.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I was going to get..."

"I don't want pizza." she whined. She gave me this pouty look. "Let's get tacos."

"Go ahead and get whatever you want."

"I don't want to stand in line *alone*!" She pulled on me. "Come on."

She's so weird. Funny, but weird. So we got tacos and then joined Tony and Jess. I was listening to them talk about where they had been, a music store and an electronics store. Every time I looked back toward the table to reach for my taco, Teresa was smiling at me, and then she'd look away quickly and turn red. I wonder what she's thinking that is embarrassing her.

"We should go look at new televisions." I told Jess.

"Yeah, we need to get one for our room." Jess told me.

"But I wanted to go see a movie." Teresa said to me. "Come with me."

"Jess wants to get a new..."

"So! She doesn't need you to help her pick out a TV."

"I just..."

"Please, Brynne. Please." She's pleading with her eyes. Kind of a sad puppy look. "I really want to go see a movie."

"Go ahead." Jess said. She was holding in a smile.

Jess is being sort of smug. She talked about me and Teresa being best friends right off, and now she thinks we are. I like Teresa, she's fun to hang out with, but she's a bit draining. And I actually do want to spend some time with Jessica, since she really is my best friend. But I do live with her, and I get to see her all the time.

"Please, Brynne?" Teresa said. Her hand was on my arm, and she was waiting for an answer.

"Ter, leave her alone." Tony said.

"Butt out." Jess whispered to him.

"I'll love you for*ever*." Teresa said.

"Fine," I said, giving in. "I guess."

"Yes!"

So now I have a new friend that is way, way too committed to being friends. Sort of clingy, can't stand to be away from me for five seconds. Great. Well... I guess I shouldn't make such an assumption, 'cause I've only known her for a few hours. This could just be the way she is around new friends. Maybe by the end of the day the new will wear off and I'll be able to do things like go to the bathroom without someone tagging along.

I gave Jess some money to get a TV, then Teresa and I hurried to the theater. We waited in line, and when we tried to get our tickets the guy wouldn't sell them to us. The movie Teresa wanted to see is rated R. So rather than going and finding Jess, she made me watch a PG movie with her. A penguin movie.

The movie wasn't that good. The penguins were cute, I guess. Just as the movie was starting, she grabbed my hand and patted it with her other hand. She said it had been so long since she had seen a movie. And then I didn't get my hand back.

I was finally beginning to shake off the huge blind spot I had all day by the time we were driving back to Hanton. This was a set up. Jess had decided to tell this girl, Tony's cousin Teresa, all about me and talk me up, then set us up on a blind date of sorts. And Teresa knew it all day long, and I'm just now figuring it out. Because I've never been out with a girl that was interested in me like that.

When we got into town I started having this slight panic attack about the possibility that Teresa would think we should have a goodnight kiss or something when they dropped us at Jess's house. She didn't. She just said bye and that she'd call me tomorrow.

I was holding back my temper as best I could. It helped that I had several bags in my hands, so I couldn't choke Jess. She had a new TV in her arms anyway, and I wouldn't want to break it. But when the front door was closed, and Tony and his cousin Teresa were gone, I had to let Jess know my feelings about what she did.

"I can't believe you did that!" I shouted at her.

"Did what?"

"You know what."

"What's going on here?" Peggy asked. "What did you do, Jessica?"

"I didn't do anything!" She sounds offended. As if she had any right.

"You set me up!" I turned to Peggy. "This wasn't a shopping trip, it was a blind date."

"It wasn't."

"Jessica," Peggy said in her 'you better tell the truth' voice.

"Hey, I didn't ever set up a date, okay. I just put the two of them together and let nature take its course."

"You set me up." I complained again.

"Yeah, well, you weren't complaining when you two were holding hands and smiling at each other."

"I had no idea what was going on until we were almost back to town!"

"Maybe not consciously."

"I... what, you think you can just turn me into a lesbian?"

"I'm not trying to *turn* you into anything, honey." she said. She's got that look, the one people get when they have to explain something very elementary to a child. "You're the one that said you almost went out with a girl before. I figured since you don't seem very interested in any of the boys around here right now, maybe you'd like her. She's seriously a flaming lesbian, so it sort of works."

"Jessica, you can't do that to people." Peggy told her. "You can't just trick them like that."

"Sor-ry." she said. "I figured there was a good chance I was wrong, I had no idea they'd be so happy together. Seriously, Brynne, I've

never seen you smiling and laughing so much."

"I... well I thought we were just having fun." I said.

"So just have fun with her. I'm not telling you that you have to do anything. If you only want to be friends with her, then just be friends with her. If you never want to see her again, don't. I tried."

"Yeah, well, she's calling tomorrow to ask me to go do something."

"So tell her to get lost if you want." she said, shrugging.

"I... I mean..." What do I mean? "She's too nice, I don't want to upset her."

"Uh-huh." Jess said. That smug smile was back.

"What?"

"Brynne, honey," Peggy said. She put her hand on my shoulder and gave a little bit of a smile. "Don't be embarrassed if you are interested in this girl."

"I never said... I didn't say I was."

"She's a very cute girl. You could do a lot worse."

"So now you're on *her* side?" I asked, waving my hand in Jessica's direction.

"No, I'm on your side. I'm on the side of you doing what feels right for you. And if that's going out with this girl, great. If it's not, just be nice and let her down easy."

"Yeah, 'cause she's *totally* into you." Jess added.

"I'm going to bed." I said.

I stomped up the stairs and threw the bags of clothes on the floor. I can't believe she would do this to me. She's my best friend, but I'm so pissed right now! I'm shaking. I'm so angry that I'm actually shaking.

I didn't even change or wash before climbing into bed. I'll probably have to do both after I calm down. I'm probably getting makeup all over the pillow.

"Jenna, why did she do this to me? I thought she was my best friend. I thought I could trust her." Just not with one certain secret.

And now I'm not sure what to do. I don't want to hurt Teresa. She's a great girl, and I had so much fun with her. We have so many things in common. I thought we could be really good friends, but now I don't know. Would she be okay with just being friends?

"Brynne." Jess said. She rubbed my back. "Honey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Leave me alone." Great, I'm crying again.

"I should have told you. I was just trying to help."

"Help what?" I sat up. "Help me feel like an idiot?"

"What? No, I just know you feel left out and alone and you want someone who loves you."

"And so you trick me?"

"I didn't even think I was doing anything like that, okay? I just

wanted to see if you'd be interested in her."

"But you told her?"

"Yeah, she knew. She was sort of pushing for it."

"Well that explains a lot about how she was acting today."

"Will you please forgive me? I'll call her and explain that you aren't into girls, that you aren't interested in her."

"So you think it's okay to just upset her? I mean I think she'd be upset."

"I don't know how to avoid that now." she said.

Great. I don't know how to avoid that, either. Thinking back on the day, it's pretty obvious that she really likes me. That she's really attracted to me. So how do I tell her to go away without hurting her?

"But I don't want her upset. I like her, Jess. We had such a great time today, and she doesn't deserve that."

"So what are you saying?"

"I don't know!" I stuck my hand up, kind of a 'sorry, I'm trying to calm down' gesture. "You just... I'm so confused now." I really am.

"Okay." She climbed up the ladder and sat next to me. "Confused about what?" She put her arm around my shoulders. "Confused because you might actually like her?" I nodded and looked away from her. "It's okay if you do. Really."

"But... I'm not sure, okay. I've never had that kind of fun with anyone. We just clicked. And... it didn't really feel like just friends kind of clicking, ya know?" Which I hadn't realized until I thought about it for a few minutes. I glanced up and she was smiling. "And stop being so happy about this!"

"Sorry."

"I'm not saying I'm interested in her. I just... I don't know what I feel, okay?"

"So you're more than a century old, and you're just now getting around to questioning your sexual orientation?"

"I'm not saying... I don't know what I'm saying."

"And you've never even thought of other girls? Never been attracted to any?"

"I... I don't know."

Of course I have. Okay, Brynne, time to stop lying to yourself and everyone else. You've known this for over a century now, isn't it time to trust someone with this secret? And if not Jess, who?

"I guess I have." I admitted.

"You never told me." she said, after a moment.

"Sorry." I whispered.

"You have nothing to be sorry about."

"Should I go away?" I asked, another sob rising up. "I better leave."

“Don't be ridiculous. Nothing has changed.”

“You're not... like, it doesn't bother you that I... I mean I'm... I'm... gay?”

“It doesn't matter to me, Brynne. You are my best friend, and if you're happy then I'm happy. You like her, don't you?” she said.

“I don't know yet. Maybe.” I admitted.

“Well sleep on it. And when she calls tomorrow, go hang out with her. If you’re not interested, tell her that. If you are, tell her so. And if you’re not sure, just tell her.”

“I...” I took a deep breath. “I just don't know if I like her yet. At least not like that.”

“It will all be okay as long as you're honest with her and tell her...”

“I...” I nodded.

“You okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good.” She hugged me. “I love you, Brynne. You know that, right?”

“I love you too. And I'm sorry I lied.”

“About what?”

“I said before that I wasn't gay. I just...”

“No reason to apologize, honey.”

“I just hadn't ever... like, admitted it before. I mean when I was growing up it just... it wasn't acceptable at all.”

“It's okay now. I just want the best for you, and I don't care if you're gay or straight, as long as you're happy.”

After showering and changing I laid in bed, thinking about Teresa. She is really, really cute. Especially the way her hair curls up around her face. She’s so bubbly and so much fun. I feel different when I’m around her. But I barely know her. I don't know what to think right now.

Saturday, May 28

Teresa called just after breakfast. I was still chewing on the last piece of bacon, actually.

Ted brought the phone to me and I took it and finished chewing.

"Hello." I said.

"How are you this wonderful morning?" she asked, her cheeriness this early making my head hurt.

"Pretty good." I said. "And you?"

"I am fabulous. So you wanna do something today?"

"I hadn't thought much..."

"Well I'll come over in a few minutes and we can figure it out then."

"Um, hang on."

I held the phone down and covered it with my hand. Everyone is looking at me. Barney is just plain staring, Jess is kind of watching in a curious, but not nosy way, and Ted and Peggy are sneaking peaks out of the side of their eyes.

"Is it, um, okay if Teresa comes over?"

"Brynne, it's okay for you to have a friend or two over during the day, you don't need to ask." Ted said.

"There won't be any arguments, will there?" Peggy asked.

She looked over at Jess, like maybe she was waiting for Jessica to apologize for what happened last night, or maybe say she didn't think she did anything wrong. And I guess it wasn't, really. She was trying to help.

"Teresa? Hey, yeah, come on over."

"I'll be there in a few." she said.

"Okay. See you then."

"Bye."

"Bye. Hey, um, we need to talk when you get here." Now everyone really is looking at me.

"About what?"

"You'll see."

"Yeah," she giggled. "I probably know already."

"I think you do."

"Will I be disappointed?" she asked, sounding very serious now.

"I don't know, will you be?"

"I'm always disappointed when I don't get my way." she said. "Am I getting my way?"

"That depends on what your way is." I can feel that I'm blushing. And all their eyes are on me.

"We'll talk when I get there."

"Okay. See you soon."

I got up and took the phone around the corner, into the hall where its base is. I put it back on the base, then I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes. Well, okay, replaying that whole conversation in my head, I guess I probably sounded pretty interested in her. My voice was doing that thing where it goes up a little, like what happens when someone is talking to someone they're attracted to.

"You okay?" Jess asked. She leaned against the wall next to me.

"I was just thinking how it always goes bad when I stay in one place for very long. It always gets complicated."

"Don't go." she said.

"I didn't... I wasn't saying that. Just that life is getting complicated."

"But it wouldn't be interesting if it wasn't."

"The last time I stayed this long it got bad. I lived in Miami,"

"In all that sun!"

"Yeah. And I graduated high school, and then I stuck around for a while. I moved across to the other side of the city, and I figured I wouldn't bump into anyone, or if I did they wouldn't even recognize me after just a few months, because I never got close to anyone. And then like six years later, When I should have been twenty four if I really was eighteen when I graduated, I bumped into one of my teachers from when I was in ninth grade."

"And she recognized you?"

"Yeah. I tried to go away without talking to her, but she saw me and started talking. And at first she was talking about how great I looked, how I hadn't changed a bit. But then I saw how that was sinking in. How she was thinking 'wow, how is it she hasn't changed one little bit in nine years'. That had nowhere good to go, so I took off."

"You just left in the middle of a conversation?"

"Yeah. I ran away. And I didn't stop until I was in Cleveland."

"Wow. When you run you really run, don't ya?" she said, laughing.

"Yeah, usually."

"Brynne, please don't do that this time."

"Look, I don't... plan on it, okay." I said. "But if I ever have to leave, I *swear* to you that I will stay in touch. You're the best friend I've ever had. Seriously, Jess, you mean more to me than my parents and little brother did. Which is sort of screwed up, but it's true. That's why I told you everything."

"I love you, little squirt." she said. She hugged me.

"Teresa is here." I said. I could hear her on the front porch. That was quick.

Jess answered the door. I went upstairs. It sounds so cliche, but I had to go make sure my hair was straight and my clothes weren't

wrinkled. So I care if people think I look a mess or not, so what? It's not like I'm worried she won't like me or something. I mean... I don't know what I mean.

"You look nice today." Teresa said immediately.

"Thanks. You look really nice too."

"So-o." she said. She smiled and shifted from on foot to the other, then back. "I was thinking we should go to the river and swim. Tony said there's this sweet spot not too far from here, we could walk."

"Oh. Um," It's sunny out. "We could do something else."

"Come on." she said. She has that look on her face. The 'I'm going to get my way' look. "If you don't want to swim, we could just walk along the river. Have that talk you wanted to have."

"I can't." I hate being like this.

"Look, Teresa, she has a skin condition, okay." Jess said. "She burns really easily."

"How easily?"

"I was out in the sun for like an hour once." I said. "I think another few minutes and I may have died."

"Oh you poor baby!" She lunged at me and hugged me. "We'll do something inside."

"I can go outside, I just can't go in the direct sunlight for very long."

"Why don't you two go out back." Jess suggested. "I'll bring some chips and cans of pop in a few."

It was awkward going out back, we had to walk through the kitchen to get there, and everyone was still in there. They didn't say anything, but I know they have questions, or comments, or something. I'm sure Barney wants to say something awful to embarrass me. He's still really fixated on me, and I don't think he likes the idea of me having a friend to spend time with if that friend may take me away from here for any extended period of time.

We went across the yard to sit under the big shade tree. She blocked the sun with her hands and her body as much as possible as we walked through the sunny part. It was kind of sweet.

"So," she said. She sat on the ground, next to me, and stared at my face. Where did the sort of shy, nervous girl that showed up here yesterday go? I guess she was over that before we got to the mall, really.

"So."

"You said we need to talk."

"Yeah."

"So were you actually thinking of something specific that we should talk about, or were you just dying to talk to me?" she asked, smiling.

"Um,"

So hey, I think you're great and all, but I've never been in a relationship, and I barely know you. Not to mention the fact that just being near you makes me nervous. And oh yeah, my mouth won't work right now to say any of this.

"Want me to start?" she asked. I nodded. "At some point last night you either figured out or Jessica told you that I asked her to introduce us. I saw your picture in Tony's yearbook, and Jessica always has amazing things to say about you, so I asked her to set it up."

"Yeah." I wish my hands would stop shaking.

"So now that you've figured this out and you know I like you and would love to keep seeing you, what are your thoughts?"

"I... um..."

"I'm a big girl, Brynne. I can take it, whatever it is."

Jess brought out the chips and pop. She was looking at me like she was evaluating whether I wanted to be left alone with Teresa or not. After a minute, she left us alone. We ate a few chips and drank our pop.

"So if you aren't into me like that, we can just be friends, maybe?" Teresa finally said.

"Uh-huh." I said. She looked a little disappointed. "I mean... I mean we can just be friends for now and see."

"For now?"

"Because I'm not sure, okay?" I can't even look at her.

"That's cool. Take your time."

"I... it's not that I'm not... look, I think you're... but I never really dated anyone."

"Oh." She said, disappointment obvious in her voice.

"That doesn't mean I'm not interested! Just... I'm trying to figure it out, okay?"

"Oh. Well good, so we have that all cleared up."

I'm not even sure what we've cleared up. Well, I guess she knows I'm sort of into her, just not quite sure yet. I also know that she likes me. I bet I'm blushing.

"I mean I do like you, I guess." I *know* I'm blushing now. "But how can you be so calm about this? Doesn't it seem the least bit awkward to you?"

"Hey, I'm just trying to make this as easy as possible on you. No pressure."

"Oh." She is? That's kinda sweet. "Right."

"Besides, I could already tell you like me." She smiled and stared into my eyes until I had to look away. "You're just coming to terms with that."

Just coming to terms with that. You could say that. When we got

home last night I was mostly angry that Jess would trick me like that. But after I calmed down from there, all I could think about is the time I spent with Teresa yesterday. She's so fun, and so pretty, and really sweet. But I barely know her.

"So do I *seem* like I'd be interested in girls? I mean how did you know I was?" This is so embarrassing.

"You mean does my gaydar go off when you're around?" she asked, laughing. I love her laugh. "Not really, no. Not that I've ever been able to tell with anyone. I have to be the worst lesbian in the world at that. I just try to be honest. Or sometimes I try flirting a little, see if I get a good response."

"Oh."

"Which I did yesterday." she said.

"Um, yeah."

So I was responding to her flirting yesterday? I guess. Why did it take me until the trip home to figure it out, then?

"We could go to the river." I said. "Like, we just have to stay in the shade. Or I do, anyway."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds good. You want to invite Jessica along? Ya know, as sort of a chaperone to keep me from forcing myself on you?" She has a look that says she may not be joking.

"It might be entertaining to see you try." I said. Why, I don't know, because if I'm not careful I'll have to explain that.

If I were to take Jessica along, what would that say to Teresa? Would she feel offended that I don't want to be alone with her? Or would she recognize that it's because I'm scared. Scared! Can you believe I'm scared of her?

I asked Teresa to wait there for a minute. I felt odd leaving her alone out there, even for only a minute. But I didn't really want to drag her inside for this.

"Hey, um," They're all still sitting at the table. Ted is reading the paper, the others aren't doing much. Waiting for me, I think. "Is it okay if I go for a walk with Teresa?" I asked Peggy.

"You don't have to ask our permission." she said. She has a smile on her face.

"We'd just like you to let us know if you're leaving." Ted told me. "Just so we know you aren't around."

"When will you be back?" Peggy asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Does she know what you are?" Barney asked.

"Why would she?" Jess asked him. "You just stay out of it. You're just jealous."

“Jealous?” Ted asked. He looked up at me, as he considered that. Then his eyes went wide. “Oh. I see. Well, have a nice time.”

“Yeah, um, okay.” I said. Could this *be* any more embarrassing?

I was trying to make my feet move, to head back out to Teresa, but they wouldn’t listen. And my hands are trembling again. Crap. I’ve never been this nervous about anything like this. Whatever this is. It’s not a date, it’s just a couple of friends hanging out. Except she wants to be more than friends. And maybe I will too, once I get to know her better. And maybe not. But I’m open to the idea, which is kind of a first for me.

“You’re going to be okay.” Jess told me. She got up and hugged me. “Calm down.”

“I am calm!”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“We’re just going to take a walk out by the river,” I said. I took a deep breath. “I’ll be fine.”

“Why are you so nervous?”

“I don’t know. I better go.” My feet still wouldn’t move. “Shove me.”

“What?”

“Shove me. Toward the door.” She was confused. “To get me started.”

“O-kay.”

She shoved me toward the door. Once she got me started, I was able to keep walking. I think I even managed a bit of a smile as I walked across the back yard.

“Okay, we can go now.” I told Teresa.

“You don’t want them to know.” she said.

“What? No, that’s not it.”

“It’s alright, I haven’t even told my parents yet. And these people aren’t your parents, so if they don’t approve then they can kick you out without any hesitation.”

“Teresa, I’m not trying to hide anything from them. I promise.”

“Not that there’s anything to tell, right?” she asked.

“They already are making assumptions.”

“So are we going?” she asked, starting toward the gate.

It was weirdly quiet as we walked down the street, toward the path that leads down by the river. She was so talkative yesterday. Maybe she is taking it easy on me because she can tell how nervous she makes me.

“Why is it that you live with the Sloans?” she asked. “Jessica never told me.”

“My parents are dead.”

“Oh.” She sounds like she feels stupid for saying anything.

“It’s no big, they’ve been gone a long, long time. My little brother, too.”

“I’m sorry.”

We were almost to the river now, and she had walked back and forth across the path up to this point so we could avoid the sun. Now she stopped and looked around. Finally she led me into the edge of the trees and we stepped over and through bushes as we made our way along the river.

I hadn’t realized until now that she had been holding my hand for a while now. Since we first turned onto the path down to the river. So? Friends hold hands, right? She was pulling me along by the hand at the mall yesterday. I don’t know if this feels comfortable, though. I mean I don’t hold hands with Jess. But would I offend Teresa if I pulled my hand back? And it’s no big deal, really.

“What happened to your family?” she asked. “How did they die? If you feel like talking about it.”

“They were killed. Some… guy came along and he killed them. I barely survived. And I really can’t talk about it. It’s too hard.”

“Okay.”

She stopped at a small clearing that looked out over the water. She stepped up to the edge, but then noticed the sunlight and moved back. She glanced up and gave me a little smile.

“My parents argue all the time.” she said. “Over everything. Over money, over what to have for dinner, over whether I have to do my homework before dinner or after, over whether Andre can go out with his friends on a school night.”

“Some times people just argue. It doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

“Yeah. Somehow it always winds up back on me and Andre. Whatever they’re arguing about. They can be arguing over money, and it suddenly becomes about our college fund, or they can argue about Dad not trimming the trees like he promised, and it’s because he had to mow the lawn that Andre was supposed to mow instead.”

“Sorry.”

“They’re getting a divorce, I think.”

She’s trying not to cry. It must really hurt to feel like you’re the reason your parents can’t stay together. I have no idea how to make her feel better, though. I’m not good at these things.

“Who have you been staying with?” she asked me. “Before Jessica?”

“I’ve been living alone.”

“They let you?” She was facing me now, shocked look on her face. “They didn’t shove you in a foster home or something?”

“I sort of didn’t let them. I sort of ran off.” True enough.

“You’re a runaway?” she asked. “Cool! Bad girl.”

“And then I rented a house and I’ve been here a couple of years.”

“Who would rent a house to a kid?” she asked.

“I paid extra so he wouldn’t ask questions.”

“Okay, so where did you get the money? You’re not a drug dealer or something are you? You’re not in some prostitution ring?”

“Um, no.” And ick.

“Well good. So how can you afford it?”

“I guess it was sort of my inheritance. And then some stocks paid off really good.”

“And nobody has found you and forced you to stay with a distant cousin or something?”

“I have no cousins. I don’t think anyone has been looking very hard for me.” Except some sadistic killers that would have finished me off if Jess hadn’t showed up.

“So weren’t you scared to be by yourself? I would be.”

“Terrified. Sometimes. But I had a gun.”

“Ooh, wow, you really *are* a bad girl.” She’s smiling about that. I don’t like it. But her smile is nice.

“I've never used it.” I assured her.

“So how’d you wind up moving in with Jessica?”

“Well,” I really don't want to talk about this. “I was attacked. Beaten up, cut, hurt really bad.”

“And you couldn’t call the police because they’d put you in foster care?”

“Yeah, basically. So Jess dragged me to her house and told them everything. They took care of me, and then they insisted I move in.”

“That’s nice of them.”

We sat on the ground and watched the birds playing near the edge of the river. I am not sure what we talked about, it was sort of mindless chatter. I’m sure in there somewhere she told me a lot about her past. I’m sure I spun a few tales about mine.

We went to the Sonic and ate cheese coneys. She can really down some food, let me tell you. It’s weird, because she’s definitely a girly girl, but she doesn’t eat like one. And then Jess is a bit of a tomboy, but she eats so daintily.

We went back to the Sloans' house after we ate our late lunch. Teresa wasn’t holding my hand on the way home, which I guess is good. I just don’t know what to think about her. She’s so much fun, and we get along great, and she’s really pretty, but I don’t know if I’m up for dating anyone. I like being friends, though.

Jess and her family were sitting in the dining room, playing cards. Why isn’t she out with Tony? Why isn’t Barney up playing his online games?

“You’re earlier than I thought you’d be.” Peggy said. It’s like four.

“Teresa has to go do laundry. Her aunt said if she didn’t have it done tonight then she would be grounded for a week.”

“How was your date?” Ted asked.

“It wasn’t a date.” I can feel my face burning. “We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Barney chimed in. “Did you kiss?”

“Barney!” Peggy said.

“Do you kiss your friends?” I asked him.

I watched them finish their game. Pinochle, it turns out. I never could get the hang of that game. I have tried and tried, but I just don’t get it. I can play, I understand the rules, but I can’t get the intricacies of bidding or how to play the hands to get the most points.

When they were done, Jess and I went up to her room. Our room. And we sat on the bed and she started grilling me, wanting every little detail of what happened today. She thinks it was a date. She isn’t saying it, she nods in agreement when I tell her Teresa and I are just friends, but she really does think it was a date, and she wants details. So I told her everything.

“So tell me what the hang up is.” she said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You two get along great, you’re like the same age, basically,”

“Give or take a century and a half.”

“You think she’s pretty, right? I mean I think she’s really pretty, and I’m not even into girls.”

“She is. But I’m not sure... I mean I don't know, it’s just different.”

“Brynne, I can tell you want her, you’re just scared. What are you scared of?”

“Other than me being nearly immortal, and her maybe finding out? Other than people like me are going around killing people, and I can’t think of a single way to stop them. Other than those same people nearly killing me, and me maybe putting everyone around me in danger because those same psychos might come back? Sure, there’s nothing to be afraid of. Oh yeah, and then Teresa kept coming back to one other thing today that has worried me for a while: child welfare people scooping me up. No, I have no worries at all.”

“Well obviously all of those. I just meant why are you scared to admit you like her?” She pulled me in for a hug. “Honey, nobody here will judge you for this. And if you’re worried about our friends at school, you haven’t ever seemed to really care what any of them think about anything anyway.”

“Because I don’t know. I don’t know what I feel!” I shouted.

“Whoa, hey, it’s okay. Don’t get upset.”

“I’m not upset!” Okay, so I am. I took a deep breath. “I just don't know if I should even think about... I mean what if I have to take off?”

“Promise me you won't. Please, Brynne.”

“I... she's going home at the end of the summer.”

“That's a long time away.”

“I don't want to put her in danger if those monsters ever come looking for me again.”

“You can't worry about that for the rest of your life, Brynne. You have to live.”

“I just... I need to think about it.”

Thursday, June 9

So I'm completely healed from being sliced and diced, I think. At least physically. Honestly, I still have dreams about it. Mostly I get scared that Jess walked in when she did. They could have killed me, and she startled them and they stopped attacking me, but they also could have killed her. I could deal with them killing me, but not her. I really don't want to die, though. I'm so torn on how that whole thing happened. I wonder how long they would have tortured me before killing me?

Teresa and I have been off doing something every day, and I feel like we've become really good friends. I wish I could tell her my secret, but it's dangerous for her.

"How was your date?" Barney asked. I just got home after seeing a movie with her.

"It wasn't a date."

Every night one of them asks me that, and every night I have to explain to them that Teresa and I are friends, that's all. And Barney... shouldn't he be out doing things with his college buddies? Oh yeah, he's too much of a loser to go to college, so he doesn't have any college buddies.

I sat on the arm of the sofa when I saw what was on the news. Another attack. At least one a week now. Police say there's a serial killer on the loose, and they are telling people not to go out at night, and if they have to go out then don't go alone until they catch whoever is doing this. Which they never will. I have to do something. Nobody else can. At least nobody else will. But I have no idea what to do.

"You don't have any friends who can get me a rocket launcher, do you?" I asked Barney.

"That would be expensive and hard to come by." he said.

"I can handle expensive."

"You're not actually thinking of going after them again?" he asked. He sat up straight and had an almost panicked look on his face. "Brynne, the last time you tried that they almost killed you."

"I know, but someone has to stop them."

"Well it doesn't have to be you."

Oh he's actually concerned. That's sort of touching. He cares about me. All this time he wasn't just trying to get into my pants, maybe. Not that he ever had a chance.

"Promise me you won't try anything." he said.

"What do you care?"

"Because I don't want to have to babysit you again when you get cut up."

“I sort of think if it comes to that, they aren’t letting me get away next time.”

“Well then Jessica would miss you too much.”

“And if I do nothing then they might come for me and kill her in the process. Or you.”

“Bring it on. I’m not letting them near you.” he told me. “We do have guns here.”

“Barney, I really appreciate what you’re saying, but I have to do something.”

“Then what about Teresa?”

“What about…”

“She’d never know. She’d think you just ran away from her.”

“We’re just friends.” I repeated for the hundredth time.

“Well maybe you are, but she’d still think you ran off without explaining and without saying goodbye. You can’t do that to her.”

He has a point there. How would I feel if my friend just ran off without any explanation? It would suck. Plus, I know she likes me. I can imagine how painful it would be if Jess did that to me.

“Please tell me if you have any other idea of how to stop them.” I told him.

“Give me a couple of days to think about it.”

“And let them kill more people?”

“You can’t rush into this, you have to take time to plan it correctly or you just get killed and then they go on killing anyway.”

“Well,” That actually makes sense. “Okay. I’ll think about it. You think about it. Barney, I can’t let them keep killing. And I might be the only one who can stop them.”

“Are you sure there aren’t more?”

“Maybe. And maybe they’re like those two.”

I was in bed already when Jess got back from her date with Tony. She was pretty upset, so I didn’t tell her about there being more attacks. Instead I sat up with her and listened to how insensitive Tony is, and how she’ll never go out with him again. As if she really meant that.

Friday, June 10

I spent the day shopping with Jess and Teresa. I bought Teresa some new clothes that she wanted. I kind of like buying her things. It makes her happy.

Jess ate lunch with us, then went off on her own, promising to see me at home. I think she was planning on calling Tony. I still don't know what they were arguing about, but I think she's getting over it.

Teresa and I snuck into an R rated movie. We paid for a PG, then just switched theaters once inside. They wouldn't let us in otherwise. Which is just plain stupid, because I go to school with the girl who was selling tickets, so I'm sure she thinks I'm her age.

It was a good movie. There were some love scenes that were slightly embarrassing to watch. And the people sitting behind us were totally making out, right there in the theater. Teresa grabbed my hand and leaned over against me as the movie was playing. It was sort of nice, actually.

We walked home after the movie, discussing what we each thought about it. She had a totally different take on it than I did, but she still liked it. I thought it was sad because the girl lost her boyfriend, she thought it was sort of a happy movie because the girl had finally allowed herself to completely fall in love with him before he died.

"Well, see you tomorrow." I said.

"Yeah."

I reached for the doorknob, but she yanked me back by my hand that she was still holding. Some day I'm going to show her that I'm stronger than her. Just to show her she can't push me around.

"Teresa,"

"I'm going to kiss you." she said. She glanced away, blushing.

"What?"

"I'm going to kiss you."

"Um," I'm not sure how I feel about that. Also, what do you say to that? "Was there a timeline you had in mind for this?"

"Oh, right now." she said. She was staring into my face now, still blushing.

"Oh. Are you sure you want to do that?" She's really, really close to me.

"Definitely."

"Oh."

"What are your thoughts on that?"

"I don't know." I told her.

"If you don't want me to, I won't." she said. She's taller than me. I never paid much attention, but she is. A couple of inches. "Do you want me to?"

"I..."

Do I want her to? I've spent almost all my time with her for a week, and she has made it clear in that time that she likes me. And I can't say I don't feel attracted to her, because I do.

"Do you want me to?" she asked again, almost a whisper this time.

I couldn't answer, so I just nodded. And then she did it. It wasn't a long kiss, and not even all that hot of a kiss, just a short kiss on the mouth. But then another real quick after it, and then a third. And then she backed away.

"Goodnight." she said.

"'Night."

"I'll be here early tomorrow, okay?"

"I'll be waiting."

I stood there and watched her go, and I contemplated the chances that someone like me could possibly ever make someone like her happy. I've always wanted to be completely, over the top in love, and I never have been. I'm not now, but this is the first time I think I've ever felt like it could grow to that.

"How was your date?" Barney asked, like always. Ted and Peggy are sitting on the sofa, watching a movie with him.

"Um," I felt myself blushing and smiling. "Good, thanks. Goodnight."

I hurried up the stairs, not listening to the questions he followed that with.

Saturday, June 11

I guess I fell asleep early last night, because I was out before Jess got home. She was up before me in the morning, too. So when I woke, she was waiting to jump on me about last night, wanting details. I told her everything.

"So wow." she said. "I was right."

"Yeah yeah." She was. "So what about you and Tony? How is that going?"

"Not well." she said. She sort of smiled. "Doesn't matter. I'm not really feeling it anyway."

"I'm sorry."

"It's cool. I'll find someone else. I mean we still hang out, so maybe he'll pull his head out of his rectal region and things will be okay." She shrugged. "Who knows."

"Your parents are watching the news." I said.

"What are you... you can hear them?"

"Yeah. There was another attack. A young girl is dead."

"But it's not your responsibility, honey." she said. "You didn't cause this."

"But nobody else can stop them, Jess."

"You can't stop them, either! They're going to kill you if you try."

"I know. I didn't say I was going to do anything. I just wish they'd stop."

"Me too." she said.

"Teresa is here." The doorbell rang. "See. Look, I have to get more blood soon. So like, I may have to go somewhere so I can nab some from a blood bank tonight."

"You don't need to, we can all give some like before."

"Ya know you actually sort of need your blood, Jessica." I said.

"Last time you took off you went after those horrible people."

"I'm not going, Jess. I promise."

"You better not." She gave me a hug. "I believe Teresa would miss you."

Teresa! Oh, I better get up and make myself at least a little more presentable. Crap, she's coming up the stairs. I hurried to the bathroom and brushed my teeth and hair. When I came out, she was sitting with Jessica, chatting while she waited for me.

"Good morning." I said.

"Morning, love." she said. She hopped up and hugged me, then gave me quick kiss. "We're going out, get dressed."

"Jeesh," Jessica said. She put her hand on my shoulder. "You're new girlfriend is demanding, Brynne. You two have fun." She left the room.

Girlfriend. Ugh. I really wish she hadn't said that. I'm probably about as red as a brick right now. Teresa is smiling, at least. I think I'm going to be sick.

"So is that what you told her?" she asked me.

"I... no, I never... I..."

"So then," She grabbed my hand and kissed it and stared at my eyes. "Are we officially girlfriends?"

"I... don't know."

"I would like that." She kissed my hand again. "Would you like that?"

I couldn't speak. When she looks into my eyes like that it gets really hard for me to make my mouth work. I've never, ever experienced that phenomenon before. It makes me nervous, too.

"Brynne?"

"What?"

"Would you like to be my girlfriend?" I nodded. "Good. Now do you need help getting dressed so we can go?"

"I think I can dress myself."

"But I want to help." she said.

I finally got the strength to shove her out of the room. She may want to help me change, but I'm not sure I'm ready for that. I mean what would happen if I started getting naked around her? I may heal quickly, but scars take a long time to go away, and I'm really scarred from the attack. It'll probably take close to a year for those to completely disappear.

I didn't even bother to try to hide how I felt about her when we were shopping. I guess I'm pretty into her too. So we held hands and even kissed a few times, and pretty much ignored anyone that seemed to have an issue with it. There aren't exactly a lot of gay people around here, so I imagine there'll be a lot of people having problems with this. I know we're getting a lot of weird looks.

"Who's this?" Halle, a girl I know from school, asked me.

"Oh, um, hi." I said. "This is Teresa."

"You're not from here." Halle said to her.

"I'm from Georgia." Teresa said.

"Huh. Wow Brynne, I would never have pictured you with someone like this. Someone from the south, I mean." She laughed a little. "Well good for you. Anyway, ladies, there is a huge sale going on upstairs, you should check it out. See ya'll later." she said, putting on a fake southern accent.

That went really well. The world is slowly changing, and people are becoming more and more accepting. If I had shown up with a girl when my parents were still alive they would have made me leave. My own parents would have disowned me. Not because they were bad

people, just because that's how everyone was back then and that's how they were taught.

"Who was that?" Teresa asked.

"Halle. She was in my history class."

"She seemed nice."

"Eh, I guess. Wanna go check out that sale?"

"Let's do it, girlfriend."

We took the stairs. We could have taken the escalator or waited for the elevator, but I sort of like the slower pace of taking the stairs sometimes. The place is becoming packed, maybe because of the sale. There are several stores up here having sales. Sales are great, even if you can afford to pay the higher price. It always feels good to feel like you're getting a bargain.

"So why don't you have a heavy southern accent?" I asked Teresa. She was holding up a sequined tank top.

"My mother is from Massachusetts, and my dad is from California. And then I spent every summer away from home. We used to visit Mom's family in Mass or Dad's in Cali in the summers. The last couple I've spent with my aunt and uncle here. Plus we lived two years in Wyoming when I was little. So yeah, sort of kills any chance of an accent."

"I've lived all over, too." I told her.

"Oh yeah? Where?"

"Everywhere."

"Like?"

"Miami, Cleveland, L.A., Portland, Milwaukee. I spent some time in Canada, lived in the middle of nowhere in Alaska for a while, lived in basically every state at one point or other."

"Wow, you're parents moved that much?"

Oh crap. See what happens when I let my defenses down and I talk too much? Stupid! Okay, this isn't a problem, I just have to cover up good. Now I have to lie to my girlfriend. Nice way to build a relationship.

"They did. And then I moved around a lot after they died. It seemed like staying in one place too long would be bad."

"'Cause they'd make you go into foster care?"

"That would be bad, I think." Not untrue.

"So how long ago did they die?"

"Gosh, it seems like forever." I said.

"You've been here for two years?" I nodded. "You must have been really young when they died? How have you lived alone so long?"

"I just... get by."

"Hey," She kissed right next to my eye, then wiped my cheeks with her hand. "Sorry I brought it up. I didn't mean to upset you, love."

I spent three hundred bucks on clothes, mostly for Teresa. It's always fun to shop. But I heard some woman warning her daughter and a friend to stick together and not wander off away from everyone, because it's too dangerous right now with all the attacks in the news.

I have to stop Joanna and Julius. I just have to.

We shopped for a while longer, but I couldn't get into it. It really is depressing that those people keep killing. I don't want to deal with this. Why do *I* have to deal with this? Why can't someone else do it? It's not fair.

Teresa's smiling face stopped smiling so much by the end of our shopping trip. When we left, she seemed really unhappy. I guess my mood is rubbing off on her. I should leave before I do something to hurt her. Not physically, I'd never, but I would hate to continue this and then her be even more upset later on, if she were to find out the truth. Or if those two come looking for me I guess they might hurt her physically.

"Shouldn't you avoid the sun?" she asked. She was nudging me toward the shaded area, just off the sidewalk.

"I guess."

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Nothing."

"I thought you were having fun earlier, and then... I don't know."

"Hey," I leaned against her and sort of hugged her. "I was."

"Are you always moody like this? Be honest, I'm your girlfriend now." she said. She tickled my side until I pulled away laughing.

"Maybe." I shrugged.

She pulled me against her and hugged me. And something about the way she was holding me made me feel really protected for a minute there. And sort of vulnerable. And I sort of let go and was crying against her shoulder.

"What is wrong, love?"

"Everything. Everything is so messed up, Teresa."

"You can tell me."

"I... I can't really talk about it right now."

"Okay. Brynne, do I need to call someone to come pick you up?"

"What? No, I... why would..."

"You seem really upset. I'm sure Mr. or Mrs. Sloan, or even Barney, would come get you. Or I could call Tony. He'd give you a ride."

"No, I'm fine."

We walked a while again, once I calmed down. She seemed angry at me. I guess because I didn't tell her why I was upset. I can't, though. I really, really can't.

"You want to see the house I was living in?" I asked.

"What house?"

“I still have it rented. If you want to see it. But you have to promise not to tease me.”

“Hmm.” She smiled again. She bent forward and bumped her forehead against mine. “I already know about your doll collection, love.”

This may not be a good idea. What if those two come back to look for me, and now I’m leading her right to them. Plus I’m sure there are things in my house that she will see that I may have a hard time explaining.

“So here we are.” I said.

“Nice. So are we going in, or just standing here all day?”

“Um, yeah.”

I opened the door and we stepped inside. Why is it always so embarrassing to show someone your personal space for the first time? I guess I feel like I’m going to be judged.

“Wow, and I thought you had a lot of clothes at home. Or at the Sloans’.”

“Yeah. I sort of like clothes.”

“Doesn’t everyone? Oh these are cute.” she said.

She found the little villages I make out of clay. Oh this is so embarrassing. Jess never said anything about these. Jess took some of my posters down, and they’re at her house, so there are all these bare places on the walls. It makes the room feel different.

“These are good.”

“Thanks. For lying, I mean.” I said, laughing.

“No, love, they’re really good.”

I like the way she calls me that. It sort of seemed odd at first, but now it just makes me feel special. She’s such a sweet girl. I wish I were normal, so we could have a normal relationship.

“So this place is kind of out there.” she said. “No bed? And your clothes are everywhere. Wow, you really did live alone, huh?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Cool. So we could like hang out here when we want to be *alone*.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“You don’t want to be *alone* with me?”

The way she says that just sounds so suggestive. No, I don’t want to be alone with her. Not like she’s saying it. Not yet. I’ve never had any kind of relationship with anyone, let alone an intimate kind of relationship.

“So you ready to talk about what had you so upset?” she asked.

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.” She said angrily. “Well, I guess we should get going. The Sloans are going to wonder where you’re at.”

“They don’t care.”

“Yeah they do. And I want to go home anyway.”

“Oh.” I could feel my eyes filling again. I wrapped my arms around her. “Please don’t be mad. The thing I’m not telling you, it’s just really personal. It has no impact on us.”

“I didn’t say it did. I wish you’d trust me.”

“I do. Don’t be mad. I don’t think I can handle you being mad at me today. I love you.”

Did I just say that? Oh wow. I’ve never really told anyone that. At least not anyone I was dating. Not that we’ve been dating long enough for me to really feel like that. But I do. At least sort of.

“I love you, too.” she said after a minute.

“I want to tell you.” I whispered. “It’s just really dangerous for people to know.”

“I wish I understood what you meant with that.” she said back. “But you’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“No.”

“Okay. For now.” She kissed me. “Someday, though? Soon.”

“Um, I... don’t know if I can, Teresa. I’m really sorry.”

“Are you afraid?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“If it was something that happened to you, or something you did, I don’t care. Love, it’s okay. I mean there’s nothing you could have done or could have had happen to you that would make me not love you.”

“You don’t know that.” I whispered.

We walked, sort of silently, back to the Sloan’s house. Teresa kissed me goodbye, but it was sort of quick and lacked feeling. She’s so upset with me, even though she’s trying not to be.

I went inside and stood at the door, watching her through the window until she was out of sight. I tried, *really tried*, to keep from crying, but it wasn’t working. I was doing okay, but every now and then a tear would escape.

I turned and saw Mrs. Sloan sitting on the sofa. She was doing a crossword puzzle, but I could tell she was sneaking peeks at me. I went over to the sofa and sat down next to her.

“Is Jess around?” I asked. Even I could hear how upset I sounded.

“She’s out with Tony.” I'm still jealous. Even if I have a girlfriend now, I still have feeling for Jess.

“Oh. I’m going to take a nap. Can you wake me for dinner? I mean if you... if it’s okay if I have dinner with you.”

“Stop asking, it’s okay for you to assume you’re eating with us, it’s okay for you to come in without ringing the doorbell, it’s okay to treat this like your own house, honey.”

“Thanks.” I actually didn’t ring the bell this time. I wonder if she noticed. “Well, I’m going to lay down.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“About what?” I asked.

“Whatever has you so upset.”

“You don’t need to listen to me whine, it’s okay.”

“Sometimes it helps to talk about things that are bothering you, Brynne.”

“I’m used to not talking about them. I’ve lived alone for a long time.”

“You don’t live alone now.”

I scooted back into the seat and stared at my hands. So she wants to listen to my complaining. Where do I start? What has me so upset, really? And why am I crying?

“I told her I loved her.” I said.

“Okay. So that upsets you?” she asked. She put her crossword book down.

“Yeah, of course.”

“I guess I don’t understand. Were you lying? I mean I don’t know why you would say that if you didn’t mean it.”

“It just came out! I didn’t mean to say it, but I was upset and I just said it.”

“But do you? It’s okay if you do.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I think so. Which makes it worse.”

“Why? Honey,” She was smiling. “Love is a wonderful thing. It’s a great feeling.”

“Because… I have to leave.”

“You don’t have to leave. You’re welcome here, we want you here.”

“Not because of you guys, you guys have been great. But I can’t tell her. She wants to know why I was so upset, and I was upset because I heard of another attack.”

“You are not responsible for that. Stop blaming yourself!”

“I just don’t know what to do.”

I sat there and cried for a while. She got me some tissues, and then she sat next to me and put an arm around me and pulled me against her. I remember my mother doing this once when I was crying about my dog getting trampled by a horse. I miss them. Not all the time, but times like this. But I’m glad to have Mrs. Sloan here right now. Peggy. I keep forgetting she wants me to call her Peggy.

“You could try telling her.” Mrs… Peggy said.

“Tell her I’m upset that some strangers are killing people in some other town?”

“No. Well that, too. But tell her your secret.”

“And put her in danger! It’s bad enough that I’ve put all you in danger, but I won’t do that to her. I wouldn’t have done that to you if

I had a choice."

"I'm not sure why her knowing would put her in danger."

"Because!"

"Are you afraid she'll say something and those people will find her and torture her to get to you?"

"Maybe."

"Do you think it's possible that they may already have seen her with you, and now she's in the same danger no matter what you do? Only maybe it'd be better for her to know what may happen to her."

"But... but..."

But what? I can't think of any good arguments right now. Actually, I can't think of anything right now. I just have no idea what to do anymore. About anything. I feel so worn down.

"I need to sleep." I said.

"Good idea. Sleep on it. Give it some thought."

"I feel like everything is going bad. I don't know what to do, Mrs. Sloan. Peggy."

"Just try to calm down and relax."

"Usually I run away at times like this. There's never been a time quite like this, really. I should have ran off instead of telling Jess."

"All of our lives would have been emptier if you had." she said. "Brynne, we all absolutely love you, honey. You're such a sweet little girl. And whatever has happened up till now, it's in the past. We are where we are. So don't have regrets, okay?"

"I don't know how you can be so accepting of this."

"Because I got to know you before I knew you were a vampire."

"I'm not a vampire!"

"Well, whatever you are." She gave me a little squeeze. "You should tell her."

I went up and laid in the bed, figuring I'd stare at the ceiling and not sleep. But I did fall asleep. A few hours later Jess shook me to wake me for dinner.

"Dinner is ready, hon." she said.

"Thanks."

"Mom says you're having a bad day."

"No."

And just like that I was in tears again. She hugged me and held me as I told her all that was bothering me between sobs. I can hear them downstairs, already eating their food. They didn't wait for us.

"Mom is right, you should tell her."

"Jess,"

"You love her. You have to tell her."

"I can't." Look where telling my best friend got us. "She'll hate me."

"I know you think that, but she'll deal with it. Or maybe she won't. But at least you'll know. If you tell her and lose her because of it, is it any worse than not telling her and just leaving her? That would hurt her, Brynne."

"And me being... rejected over *this* wouldn't hurt me?"

"You have people who understand and can help you through it."

It was hard to sitting with them to eat dinner. And on top of everything else, I need more blood again. Getting cut up so badly has really weakened me. I'm healed now, but it has taken a lot out of me. I'm going to have to go looking for some more.

"Stick around." Peggy told me, after we ate. Everyone was getting up.

"Um," I said.

"What's up?" Jess asked her.

"Jessica, maybe you should leave us alone."

"Does she have to?" I asked. This could be bad. Is she going to kick me out?

"She can stay if you want her to." Peggy told me/

Peggy cleared away most of the dishes. I tried to help, but she shoved me back into the chair. When she was done, she sat across from me. She took a drink from her glass, then stared at me for about two minutes before she spoke.

"So how much do you really love Teresa?"

"I don't know."

"You don't strike me as the kind of girl that falls in love easily."

"I've never..."

"But you are with her now?" Jess asked.

"I... guess." I said, nodding. Didn't we cover this already?

"Well it's important that you don't just guess right now." Peggy said. "Do you love her?"

"Yes." It's so scary to even admit that.

"Does she really love you? I want you to think about that for a minute. Is this just an infatuation for her, or do you think she really loves you?"

"They haven't been dating for very long, Mom." Jessica said.

"But sometimes you just know." I said. They were giving me that 'how would you know' look. "I've seen it a lot. I watch people."

"So what do you think?" Peggy asked.

"I think she does." I can feel tears on my face.

"Do you really want to spend the rest of your life, however long that may be, and not know what it's like to truly let yourself experience that, honey?" she asked. "That would be such a loss."

"I don't want her to get hurt."

"She won't get hurt, Brynne." Jess said. She put her arm around

me. “You need to tell her.”

“I can’t. She’ll… she won’t believe me.”

“Then you’ll have to prove it to her.” Peggy said.

“She’ll be scared of me.”

“I wasn’t.” Jess said.

“You were too.”

“Okay, a little, but it didn’t take me long to get over it. Because I love you, you’re my bestest friend of ever, girlie.”

“Nice grammar.” I said. She's trying to make me smile. “What if she… what if she hates me? What if she tells someone and they come for me? What if…”

“Brynne, honey, “ Peggy said. “You can’t live your life on what ifs. You need to decide if you love her enough and trust her enough to tell her. But I really think you should.”

“But… I’m scared.”

“I’ll help, if you want me to.” Jess said.

“We all will. Just tell us when and we’ll help you tell her.”

“I… I’m… I’ll think about it.” I wiped my face. “This is so hard. This is why I've always just ran off before when things got tough.”

“Sometimes the hard stuff is worth sticking around for.” Peggy said.

I sat in our room, crying and thinking. They’re right. I need to either tell her or break up with her. And I don’t want to break up with her. I mean… I love her. I do.

“Is Teresa there?” I asked. I think it was her uncle who answered the phone.

“Brynne?” Teresa said, just a few seconds later.

“Hey. So can you come over? I really need to talk to you. It’s important.”

“Sure.”

“Can you spend the night?”

“Hang on.”

She was away from the phone for a while. I guess I should have asked permission before inviting someone to stay in the Sloans’ house. I don’t think they’d mind, usually, but this being my girlfriend may change that.

“Brynne. Hey, yeah, I can stay over. What’s up?” She asked, concern in her voice.

“I just really need to talk to you.”

“I’ll be there in a while.”

I waited, curled up on the bed, listening for her. It wasn’t too long until I heard a car, then I heard her at the front of the house. Then the doorbell. Then she was on the stairs. I did my best not to cry.

“Hey, love. What’s going on?”

“I just... need to tell you something. About me. The thing I couldn’t tell you earlier.”

“Oh.” She looks scared now.

She sat on Jessica’s bed and I climbed down to sit next to her. Jess was coming up the stairs, I could hear her. This is going to be so hard.

“Jessica is coming.” I said.

“What?”

“I can hear her.”

“Okay.”

She looks so confused. And she actually seemed to be worried about me. I turned toward the door and waited. And waited. Jess had just started up the stairs when I told her, and she was taking her time and walking very softly and slowly. And then she appeared in the doorway.

“I have very good hearing.” I said.

“I guess so.” Teresa said.

“She also has great eyesight.” Jess told her.

“Good to know. Brynne, what is it you wanted to talk about?”

“This is it. Or part of it.” I told her.

“I’m confused.”

“And you will be for a while.” Jess told her. “So our girl here has some special talents. Mostly stuff that’s hard to prove, like being able to run really fast and keep going for hours.”

“You’re a fast runner? And why is this so bad? So bad that you wouldn’t tell me earlier?”

“No, there’s more.” I said. “I also am really, really strong.”

“And?” She sounds mad.

Jess said “Fast, strong, super hearing, super eyesight, can’t go out in the sun. Sound familiar?”

“What do you mean?”

“I have to...” I took a deep breath and looked at Jess, and she nodded. “Like once every few weeks I have to have blood. To drink.”

“What? Alright, I don’t know what this stupid game you’re playing is, but...”

“Can you get a knife, Jess?”

“I’m going home.” Teresa said.

She started to get up, but I grabbed her arm. She’s shaking. Maybe she thinks the knife is for her. Like I’m going to cut her so I can drink her blood. I did just say I drink blood.

“Stay. Please. I promise you won’t be hurt.”

“Brynne, I don’t know what this is about.”

“Just wait a few minutes. And then you can go if you want.”

“Just tell me what it is you were going to tell me.”

“She’s a vampire.” Jess said. She handed me a box knife she had in

her desk.

"I'm not a vampire!" I turned back to Teresa. "Well, not exactly. But sort of."

"Yeah, okay." She laughed. "You're so weird."

"I heal really fast, too." I said. I slid the knife down my arm, just enough to make it bleed.

"Brynne!" She lunged at the knife and grabbed it from me. "What the heck are you doing!?"

"Just wait."

"Don't worry." Jess told her.

Teresa scooted away from me as far as she could and sat there, crying, not knowing what to do. Jess got a wash cloth from the bathroom. It had been about a minute since I cut myself, and when I wiped away the blood the cut was almost invisible.

"See." I said. "No more cut."

"How?"

"We told you, she's a vampire."

"Stop calling me that!" I slid over and grabbed Teresa's hand. "I don't age. Almost, anyway, so I'm stuck at fifteen. For a while now, actually."

"How long?" she managed to ask.

"I was born in eighteen fifty-six."

"Yeah right."

"You want more proof? Let's see, when you came over here the first time Tony asked you why you were so nervous, then told you to just chill. I was sitting up here when I heard that. Right now Peggy and Ted are watching a country music video. You want to go down and check?"

"Having good ears doesn't mean anything."

"And everything else?" Jess asked.

"So what about you?" she asked Jessica. "Are you one too?"

"No. Just her best friend."

"So why are you telling me this?" she asked. She is shaking and crying. "If you are what you say you are, why tell me? Am I like dinner, or something?"

"I would never..."

"She doesn't hurt people." Jess said.

"I get blood from blood banks. I would never, ever hurt you. I love you, that's why I'm telling you. Because you need to know."

"Okay, so now I know."

"And you believe me?"

"I don't know. This is all so hard to believe, ya know?"

It's not an easy thing to prove, really. What do I do, attack someone so she can see it? I'm not an animal. I can't prove that I'm

not aging, not unless she sticks around for a couple of years. I can prove the little things, like the healing and hearing, or show her how easily I burn in the sun.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"I'm fine." she said. She sniffled. "I'm worried about you."

"Don't worry about me. I've been fine for a century and a half, I'll be okay."

"See, that's the stuff that worries me."

"She thinks you're insane." Jess said. "Or that we're both insane."

"You don't believe me?"

"Look, Brynne, I believe something is different about you, okay. I can see that you heal fast, okay. And I believe your hearing is amazing, and all. I just... you can't be *that* old. And I don't even believe in vampires, that's just stupid."

"I'm not a vampire." I grabbed her hand. She let me hold it, but she was trembling. "The guy that made me like this called us eternals. I have no idea what we are. And for over a century I thought I was the last, that it would all end when I died, but now there are more."

"There are more?" she asked.

"Yeah."

I went across to Jessica's desk and brought up the browser on her computer. I did a quick search and brought up a lot of articles about the recent attacks. I had to go over and pull Teresa up from the bed. She's so scared right now.

"Sit down. Look through these." I said.

I sat across the room, terrified that she would be scared or hate me. Jess sat next to me and we waited. It didn't take long until she was crying. Jess put her hand on my shoulder and gave a squeeze.

"This all... is those other ones, the ones you say are like you?" Teresa asked.

"Yes."

"You're not involved with anything like that?"

"She tried to stop them, Teresa." Jess told her. "That's who attacked her before."

"Really?"

"Um, yeah." I said.

"Are you okay? Will they come back?" She was up and over next to me in an instant. "Oh Brynne, are you okay? Did they hurt you bad?"

"I'm fine."

"They tore her up pretty badly." Jess said.

"You have to call the cops, or... or someone!"

She wrapped her arms around me and held me as she cried. And then I started crying. At least she isn't running away. I'm glad about

that, I guess.

"There's nobody to call." I told her.

"There has to be someone."

"No, Teresa, there's nobody."

"Well, we just..."

"Calm down, okay."

"But what if they come back for you? They could come back!"

"Shh, it's okay."

It really took a long time to calm her down. She was so concerned for me. It was so sweet, really. She truly loves me. I don't know how I deserve her.

Jessica had slipped out of the room at some point. I guess she didn't want to sit here and listen to us sob. Or maybe she was being nice and giving us some time alone.

"I love you." I told her.

"I love you too, Brynne."

"Even if you think I'm insane?"

"I don't. I just don't know what to think."

"So this is what I was afraid to tell you. You can leave now, if you want to."

"No. Huh-uh."

"So you want to stay? You're not scared."

"I'm bigger than you." she said. She laughed. "Okay, so you could probably bite my neck and kill me, right? Or would that make me like you?"

"No. That's not how it works."

"How does it work?"

"I don't know exactly. I know you'd have to drink my blood. And then too much would kill you. Too little would make you really sick, and could also kill you."

"Gross."

"Sure you don't want to leave?"

"I'm sure."

While Teresa was in the restroom I went downstairs. The whole Sloan family were sitting around the television. They all looked up at me when I stepped off the stairs. At my tear-stained face.

"How did it go, honey?" Peggy asked.

"Good, I think." I said. "Um, is... is it okay... I mean I kinda asked her to spend the night."

"Yeah, that's fine." Ted said.

"Really? I thought... I mean I figured since we're... well, we're dating, so I thought maybe you wouldn't... um, want her to."

"What, you two planning on doing it?" Barney asked.

"Barney!" Peggy said. "Brynne, honey, just ignore my rude son."

“Sure, but if I brought a girl home...”

“Barney, if you could get off your butt long enough to find a girl I’d be thrilled.” Ted told him.

“Um, I... I don’t suppose there are any cookies or anything, are there?” I asked.

“Check above the sink.” Peggy told me. “There should be something there.”

Jess said “I’ll check, you go on up.”

“Thanks. Goodnight everybody.”

Teresa was sitting on the edge of the bed when I got upstairs. She’s still shaking. But she has handled this very well. Better than I expected. It really surprises me that she didn’t run away screaming. Either because she was scared or because she thought I was nuts.

“You’re dressed for bed, I see.” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Then go ahead and lay down and I’ll go change. Jess may bring some cookies in a minute, if you want some. Oh, and... look out for Jenna.”

“Is she up there?” she asked, smiling.

I changed in the bathroom. I could hear Jessica coming up the stairs, and I could hear the crumpling of a bag of cookies. When I came out, she and Teresa were both eating. Teresa had my doll in her lap, cradling it like a baby. She’s so cute like that.

“Are the cookies good?” I asked her.

“They are exceptional.”

“You’re in a really good mood, ya know.”

“I am.” she agreed.

“Why?”

“That’s a stupid question.” Jess chimed in.

“And why is that a stupid question?”

“Either you’re going to get an answer you don’t like, or you’re going to get an answer you don’t believe. Let it go, honey.”

“Don’t like?” I asked.

“Like if she doesn’t make sense and you start to question whether she’s cracking up.”

“And the other?”

“She truly doesn’t care, she’s just happy to finally know what’s bothering you.”

“Actually, I don’t care what you are, and I still don’t know what to believe.” Teresa said.

“Oh.” I said.

Jess headed to take a shower and I climbed up on the top bunk, next to Teresa. It was sort of uncomfortable to have her there beside me. Not bad, just... it made me nervous. And I felt her body heat right

there next to me. And then she rolled against me. That was it, just laying there against me, and I was basically having a panic attack.

I was trying really hard to hold my breath, to slow my breathing. It wasn't working. It was getting worse, in fact. I was gasping for breath. I'm not sure what happened, I just freaked out with her there.

"Is something wrong?" she whispered.

"Yes." I said between gasps.

"Love,"

"Y-you make me nervous, okay." I said. "I'm sorry."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No!"

"What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing. Nothing." I sat up and took a deep breath. "I'm not used to someone being so close."

"Are you claustrophobic? Is this just too crowded?"

"No. That's not it." I feel like such an idiot. "But thank you."

"What do you want to do, then?"

"I don't know! I just... I don't know. Like... it's just hard for me, okay."

I laid down and she pulled me over against her. She kissed my neck, then with the slightest touch, ran her finger around my ear. This isn't calming me.

"My parents are visiting next week." she said. "I really want you to meet them."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I want them to see how amazing you are."

"Teresa, you don't have to."

"I've never introduced them to anyone else I've dated."

"And you start with *me*?"

"You think you can avoid telling them you're a vampire?" she asked.

"I'm not a vampire!"

"Whatever you are, it probably wouldn't be good to say that to them."

"Obviously."

"Hey, I'm not ashamed." she said. She kissed my neck again. "I love you the way you are."

"I love you too."

"So I've never told my parents I'm a lesbian. I'm sure it'll come as a shock. Are you going to have a problem with that? If they don't take it well?"

"Teresa, don't worry about me. You're the one it'll be hard on. I'm not their daughter, if they don't like me I can deal with it."

"I can't live with that."

I don’t know when it happened, or what caused it, but I stopped having trouble breathing. Teresa fell asleep in the middle of our conversation, her arm draped over me. I hugged her arm, then carefully slid out from under her and climbed from the bed without waking her.

I laid out a blanket on the floor to sleep on. It may not be the most comfortable place to sleep, but I've had worse. And then I looked around for Jenna. Teresa had her tucked up under her arm and was holding tight. I guess I can do without my doll for one night.

I woke an hour later, when Jess came in. I laid there, thinking of the dream I had been having. I’m meeting her parents, and they don’t like me. And then somehow I get a cut, and I bleed into their food. I’m looking at it, thinking about how much I hate them for not liking me and for making life hard for Teresa. Thinking how I could just let this go, let them eat the food and get sick. And while I’m arguing with myself, and deciding that I shouldn’t, someone takes the food away and gives it to them. Only they don’t get sick, they die. And Teresa hates me for it forever.

Sunday, June 12

I woke up and Jenna was gone. I always have Jenna in my arms, and she wasn't there. I

love that doll so much that it physically hurts when she's missing. I sat up quickly, scanning my surroundings. Oh yeah, she's up in the bed with Teresa.

I stepped on the ladder to the top bunk to check on Teresa. She was sleeping soundly, Jenna held tightly in her arms. I kissed Teresa's cheek, being careful to not wake her. I went into the bathroom and brushed my teeth and ran my fingers through my hair. And then I went downstairs to check on breakfast.

"Good morning, Brynne." Peggy said to me. She's standing in front of the stove, cooking eggs. "Would you like some?"

"If there's enough, yeah. Um, I should probably give you some money to help pay for groceries."

"Oh don't be ridiculous."

"No, I'm not. Look, I've got plenty of money, so it's no big deal."

"Brynne honey, don't feel like you have to help out around here. You have a long life in front of you, and you may need that money some day. We're more than happy to have you around."

"I just... I can always make more money. I feel kind of like a burden, and if you don't let me help it's going to make me feel guilty for a long time."

She shook her head, but didn't say more about it. She finished the eggs and put a plate in front of me. A moment later there was a glass of orange juice added. She was getting bread out to make toast.

"Um, no toast for me." I said. "I mean... if you were going to... offer." Now I feel embarrassed for assuming.

"So how did it go with Teresa last night? She didn't run off, I noticed."

"She seems okay. I'm not sure she really believes any of it."

"I'm not sure I believe some of it." she said. She smiled. "But she stayed."

"Yeah." I thought of her laying there right now and I smiled. "You should see how cute she is, laying there and hugging Jenna."

"Jenna is your doll, right?"

"Yeah." I could feel myself turning red. "It's just so cute the way Teresa is holding her, you really have to see it."

"I'll take your word for it." she said.

"Um, yeah." I must really be so red. "Anyway, um, if Teresa is hungry when she gets up, is it okay if I make her something?"

"I can cook something for her now, if you want to go wake her up."

“No, um, it’s okay. She probably needs the sleep after the shock she got last night.”

“And how are you doing? Have you recovered completely from all your injuries?”

“Mostly. I need more blood soon. I’m going to have to go looking for a new place to get some.”

“We can all…”

“No!” I said adamantly. “I appreciate the offer, but I can’t allow you to do that. I’ll be okay.”

Jessica was awake. I could hear her moving around upstairs. She has a pace to her steps that is distinct, I know it’s her. I think Teresa is still asleep. I guess I should go up and get dressed.

“You let her have your doll?” Jess asked. She was standing next to the bed. She looks shocked.

“I didn’t let her have it, she just… kind of wound up with Jenna last night. Isn’t she cute?”

“Yeah, whatever. Anyway, that girl sleeps sound, doesn’t she?”

“So what are you doing today? I thought maybe we could go look at cars.”

“What, are you planning on buying one?” She reached up and ruffled my hair. “You’re not old enough to drive, honey.”

“I’m ten times the driving age.” I wish she'd stop ruffling my hair.

“Based on your birth date, maybe, but not physically. And you have a very young spirit.”

“Huh.” Not sure if that’s a complement. “You’re old enough to drive.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have a license, or enough money to buy a car.”

“You can get a license. And I can buy the car.”

“Oh.” She gave me a twisted smile. “You can’t buy me a car, Brynne.”

“Why not?”

“Because,”

“Oh, well, *because*. Of course, why didn’t I think of that? Because.” I gave her a fake slap, very lightly on the cheek. “Wake up girl! Someone just offered you a car.”

“You can’t just buy me things, honey.”

“Well I need *someone* to drive me around, ya know!”

“Take the car so I can sleep.” Teresa whined.

“Did we wake you?” I asked. I stepped on the bottom bunk so I could see her. “I’m sorry, Teresa. Go back to sleep.”

“Are you going to make me lay here alone?”

“Um, you have Jenna.”

“Mm.” She yawned and opened her eyes a little. “She’s not warm.”

“Um, okay.”

Jess headed down for breakfast. She was actually getting mad at me because I want to buy her a car. What an odd girl. I climbed up next to Teresa in the top bunk.

"How long have you been up, love?" Teresa asked. She pulled me against her.

"A while. I had breakfast. If you want, I can go get you something."

"What did you have? You didn't bite my neck while I was sleeping, did you?"

"No."

"Good. Hey, how come you're warm? Aren't vampires supposed to be cold?"

"I'm not a vampire." I told her. I'm trying not to be angry, but I don't like being called that.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Can you just wake me in like half an hour?"

When Teresa finally woke up we got dressed and dragged Jessica along as we walked to Teresa's Aunt and Uncle's house. Tony's house. Jessica has been here so often that she didn't seem to think anything of just walking over and flopping on the sofa when we entered.

"Uncle Mike," Teresa said. "this is Brynne." I pulled my hand away from hers when his eyes settled on them. She looked over at me, then grabbed my hand again. "Um, my, um girlfriend." she said. "We're dating."

She told him that. Wow. She's so nervous, though. She's moving from one foot to the other, and her eyes keep darting away from him. He's just standing there, a bit of shocked look on his face.

"Well," He smiled then laughed. "I take it you haven't told your parents about this yet?"

"Um, no."

"Well don't worry, I won't say anything. If you think you'll have any problems telling them, just let me know and I'll see if I can help you out."

"Oh. Thanks. I don't think I'll tell them right now, though. They have enough going on. Plus Daddy is sort of... um..."

"Conservative?" he said, a grin on his face. "At least that's the nice way to put it."

"Yeah."

"You can count on my support, one hundred percent, okay?"

"Thanks Uncle Mike."

"And you," he said, extending his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"A pleasure to meet you." I said. I shook his hand.

"And have you told *your* parents about this?"

"Uncle," Teresa said, her voice in a warning tone. "Her parents died." she said, barely above a whisper.

“Oh I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks, but it’s okay, it was a long time ago. So you’re on Teresa’s mother’s side, or father’s?” Redirect the conversation, so he can’t ask any more about my parents.

“Sabrina, Teri’s mother, is my little sister.”

“Teri?” I said. Teresa turned red. “Anyway, we were going to see if Tony was around.” I told him. “We’re going to go looking at cars.”

“He’s around here somewhere.” He turned toward Jess, who was fiddling with the television remote. “Jessica, why don’t you go see if he’s out back.”

“Sure Mike.”

She disappeared out through the back of the living room, through the kitchen I assume. Mike leaned back against the arm of the sofa and crossed his arms and watched me and Teresa. He was smiling, and I was feeling every bit as nervous as Teresa looked.

“Stephanie is going to find this surprising.” he said.

“Not really.” Teresa told him. “I told her, like, two years ago.”

“Two years. So you were thirteen then? Thirteen is kind of young to make such a big choice.”

“It’s not a choice!” She sounds like she’s had that argument with someone before.

“Sorry, sorry. Didn’t mean anything by it. Brynne, did you know when you were thirteen? And if you don’t mind me asking, how long ago was that?”

“I did,” I said. I knew, I just was trying not to think of it because it was never a possibility back then. “I’m fifteen.” That should avoid me lying about how long ago I was thirteen.

“I find this interesting. When I was your age I couldn’t decide which socks to wear, let alone figure out a huge life-defining thing such as this. Isn’t it odd that there are more and more gay people these days? Why do you think that is?”

“There’s not.” I said. “I mean I doubt it. I think more people are just refusing to hide it now. It has become a little more acceptable. There were probably a lot of gay people in the eighteen hundreds, even, who just hid it because everyone expected them to get married young and have a family. Like I bet there were a lot of girls our age whose parents tried to set them up to marry some random guy. So maybe some of those girls were lesbians, but never got a chance to even say so, or to even realize it. Back then women didn’t get a say in a lot of things.”

“Seriously?” Teresa asked. “Like, they tried to set you up to marry someone?”

“Set who up?” Mike asked. Great Teresa, just blab my secrets.

“Well, I mean, that’s what I hear.” I said.

“That’s sad.” Teresa said.

Mike offered us some snacks, which we refused, then he went into the kitchen, presumably to get a snack for himself. So Teresa and I were left to wait for Jess and Tony. She was taking forever to find him.

“Did they really try to marry you off?” she asked.

“There was a guy they were interested in. *They* were interested, not me.”

“Wow, that sucks.”

“Yeah. But it didn’t happen. And now here I am.”

“Hmm,” She leaned over and put her face down next to mine. “How did I get so lucky?” She kissed me. “I’m glad you’re a vampire.”

“I’m not!”

“You are so cute when you’re mad.”

“And I’m not cute when I’m not mad?”

“Of course you are, love.”

Where is Jess? How long does it take to find Tony and tell him we want a ride? Maybe he just doesn’t want to go. I find it really uncomfortable sitting in this house. I don’t know, it just feels... claustrophobic or something.

“This all seems so fast to me.” I told her.

“What does?”

“Us.”

“Oh.” She frowned and backed away from me a bit. “I’m sorry if I’m pushing things too much.”

“No, Teresa, not at all. I was just meaning... I never imaged anything seeming right like this. It’s... it’s nice. I can trust you and share things with you, like I always wanted. And we click like I never imagined possible.”

“Well that’s a good thing, right?”

“Yes. Definitely.” I squeezed her hand. “But you scare me a little.”

“Says the va... um... whatever you are.”

Jess and Tony finally came back inside, finally, and we jumped into his car and drove to the area car lots. This all seemed like a good idea in my head, but Jess and Tony wanted to get out and look at each and every car, and it was sunny out.

“Let’s check this one.” Jess said.

She jumped out and was heading toward the little red car. Teresa opened her door and was getting out, but when I didn’t budge she turned back and reached for my hand. I pulled it away.

“Come on, love.”

“I can’t.” I pointed at the glaring sun shining on the cars and ground. “It’s really bright.”

“Well it’ll just be a minute.”

“I’m already burning, Teresa.”

“Seriously?” I nodded. “Oh. Are you okay?”

“As long as I don’t get any more sun.”

“Should we go home now, then?”

“I’ll be okay.”

She climbed in next to me. I told her she should go on and look, but she refused to leave me alone in the car. She even took her sweater off and blocked the sun that was shining through the window so I wouldn’t have to lean forward so far to avoid it.

“Yeah, you’re turning pink.” she said. She kissed my cheek. “My poor baby.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Is there anything I can do? Do you want me to rub aloe on you when we get home?”

“I…” That does sound interesting. But I’m not ready to have her rubbing all over me quite yet. “I’ll just take a cool shower and I’ll be okay in a day or so.”

“A cool shower? Want company?”

“Remember when I said this is moving fast and you scare me?” I asked her.

“Oh. Right. Sorry, love.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just because I’m saying no right now doesn’t mean I always will.”

“That sounds like an invitation.”

“Maybe.” I felt my face curling into a smile, even though I was trying to discourage her at this point. “We’ll discuss it when the time is right.”

“And when is that?”

“You’re fifteen, what are you in such a hurry about?”

“Because of *you*.” She grabbed my hand. “But I can wait. I can be patient.”

“Good.”

“But love, you really are burning, aren’t you?”

“I’ll survive.”

“My goodness, Brynne, why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“I thought I’d be okay.”

Tony and Jess finally came back to the car. She liked this one, a Toyota something, but she wanted to look at more. Teresa put her foot down, told them I had to go home. When Tony started to argue, Jess took a good look at my now very pink arm and yelled at him to shut up.

When we got back to the Sloan’s house, nobody was home. Tony again whined and complained about having to come home early. Jess repeated, again, that I have a skin problem and burn easily.

“You guys can go.” Teresa said. “Go, find your car. We’re fine here. I’m just going to get her into a cool bath, to see if it’ll help, and then if she’s up to it we’ll watch a movie or something.”

“Good, let’s go.” Tony said.

“Will you be okay, honey?” Jess asked.

“Go, I’ll be fine. It’s not that bad, really.”

“Okay.” She hugged me. “You need to put something on that. There's some sun burn lotion in the cabinet in the upstairs bathroom.”

Teresa pulled me up the stairs and she started running water in the bathtub. I sat there, trying to figure out how to get out of this, while she went to the bedroom and got a robe from the closet so I’d have something to put on afterward.

“That’s Jessica’s.”

“Do you have one?” Teresa asked.

“Not here.”

“Well then you can use hers. Now come on, get up, get naked.” she ordered.

“Um, Teresa,”

“Come on, come on.”

“I can take a bath by myself.”

“Just take your clothes off.”

“But,”

“What, are you embarrassed? Come on.”

“I don’t... there haven’t been... there are only a couple of people that ever saw me without clothes on, and I didn’t have a lot of choice about it.”

“Wait, you *are* embarrassed?” She grabbed my shoulders, gently. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about, love. You’re great.”

“But...”

“Don’t you trust me?”

I turned my back to her and started to undress. I’m not sure why she insists on this. It feels like she has ulterior motives, though. I turned my head to look over my shoulder at her when I heard her gasp.

“What?”

“Brynne, you... are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine, it’s just a little sunburn.”

“No,” She’s starting to cry. “You have scars. All over.”

“Teresa, I told you about this. Jess told you about this. I was chopped up pretty bad, remember?”

“I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“Oh.” She’s completely disgusted by me now. “Is this... why you insisted on this?”

“What?”

“So you could see how gross I am and...”

“No, Brynne, that’s not true.”

“Just go home.” I told her. I could feel tears welling in my eyes.

“Brynne,”

“I can’t help it if someone tried to kill me! And if you have a problem... just go, Teresa.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry I got you into this. That I told you any of this and burdened you with it.”

“I’m not leaving!” She sat on the side of the tub. “I’m not scared and I’m not worried about your stupid scars! I just was worried about you, that’s all. I love you. I’m not going anywhere.” She looked away. “Even if you want me to.”

“Oh.” I'm stupid. “I’m sorry.”

“Just get in the tub.”

I couldn’t argue any more. I made her cry because she was worried about me, and then I shout at her and freak out because I doubt her. I can’t really argue after doing that. So I finished undressing and got into the cold water. It felt good on the burns, but cold everywhere else.

“Would you like something to drink? Or a snack? I could get you a book, or some music.”

“I’m fine.” Like I could read book if I had her get one anyway. I’m sitting here with my arms covering as much as I can.

“You scare me.” she said in a weak voice. “Not you personally, just what you are and what you’ve been through.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I just have a really hard time believing the things you told me, and I see things like those scars and it makes me understand that you meant it.”

“I’m really, really sorry, Teresa.”

“No, don’t. Look, I’ll get a hold on this, eventually. It doesn’t change that I love you.”

“Why?” I asked, not sure I wanted to really know.

“Because it doesn’t have anything to do with who you are. Not really.”

“No, I mean why do you love me?” I feel so embarrassed for asking that.

“I can’t explain it. I just know.”

“Don’t you think it’s too soon to say that?”

“No. Maybe usually, but not this time.” She dipped a cloth in the cool water and laid it across my forehead. “Is it too soon for you? To feel that way? Do you even feel that way?”

“We already know I’m strange, though.” I said. “And I do love you.

I just don't feel worthy."

"Silly girl."

"I'm too old for you."

"You're fifteen."

"I've been fifteen for over a hundred years."

"I don't care."

"Maybe I do."

"You're not getting away from me, Brynne Campbell. Deal with it."

She left me alone to dry and dress myself. She said I was obviously too shy for her to get too good a look anyway. I dried off and wrapped in the robe. My burns are turning darker and darker. Not as bad as before, and I won't spend several days in bed over it, but it is hurting pretty badly.

I let her rub the aloe onto my arms and neck, and around my face. It felt really good, too. And then we laid in bed and watched a movie. And I fell asleep.

"Wake up, my little strawberry." Teresa said. "Dinner is done."

"Huh? Oh Teresa, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"It's okay. Come on, let's go eat. Mrs. Sloan made meatloaf."

The Sloans all made comments on my still darkening burns. They hurt bad now. Mrs. Sloan keeps talking about taking me to the doctor.

"Did you find a car?" I asked Jess. I wanted to know, but I also wanted to change the subject off of me.

"I really like that little red one."

"We should get it tomorrow, then."

"You're not buying her a car." Ted told me.

"She doesn't even have a license." Barney complained.

"She can get one. And then we'll have the car already." I told him.

"Where are you parking this car, Dear?" Peggy asked.

"Um, here. It'll be Jess's car."

"So it'll sit in our drive for six months?" Ted asked me.

"You could drive it." I told him. "Or even Barney."

"Oh," Barney said, smiling. "In that case, I'm all for it."

"Great." I said. "So Mr... um, Ted. If I give you the money, can you go buy it? I doubt they'll want to sell it to either of us, they think we're just kids."

"You *are* just kids." he said. "I can go by after work. You'll have to be ready when I get off so we can get right over there before they close."

After dinner, Teresa went home instead of staying over again. Just as well, I guess. I already feel like I'm imposing on the Sloans, I don't need to move my girlfriend in too.

My girlfriend. That seems so weird to even think. I never imagined linking those two words before. But now I know that I was just being

stupid. I *can* have a girlfriend. But I didn't want to be close to anyone, anyway, and put them or me at risk. How restrictive.

"Goodnight." I told Jess.

"'Night, honey." She switched the light off. "And goodnight, Jenna."

"You don't have to do that."

"Hey, if she's important to you, she's important to me."

"Are we just talking about the doll?"

She didn't answer, but I get the feeling that Jess would do anything she could to help Teresa now, and to keep her safe, because Teresa and I are together. It's nice to know that Jess cares enough about me that it extends to Teresa.

Monday, June 13

I had plans to go to the park with Teresa today, but when I woke up I was in so much pain that there was no way I could do it. Instead she came over and put aloe on my burns for me.

We sat in the living room, on the sofa, watching movies. She made popcorn and got our drinks, and wouldn't even let me get up to get more ice for my pop. And she pulled my feet into her lap as we were watching and she gave me an amazing foot massage. She's really good to me.

When the movie was over, a news broadcast came on. Another girl was found dead. Drained of blood. This can't be happening. It can't.

"Are those the other vampires?" she asked. She had wrapped her arm around me. "Sorry. I just mean the other people like you?"

"No, you can call *them* vampires. They're evil, horrible, blood sucking monsters."

"Did they do this?"

"Yeah." I rubbed at my eyes. I hadn't realized I was crying. "If you want to leave, I'd understand." And then I realized I could sound too eager. "But I really hope you stay."

"I'm not expected home until later. Uncle Mike and Aunt Steph know I'm over here."

"I didn't mean just for now."

"Oh." she said. "No way. Hu-uh. I love you."

"I love you too."

"Stop talking about me leaving, then, okay?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just trying to make it easier for you if you want to go."

"Okay, well, I'm not going anywhere. I wouldn't care if you were a hideous monster, like them, I'd still love you."

"I don't deserve it."

"I'll be the judge of that."

Late that night, after Teresa left and Jess and I were in bed, I broke into tears again. I should have let Teresa stay. She offered to. Maybe it would have made me feel a little better.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Jess asked.

"Those... people. Jess, they're killing people. Innocent... and they just kill them."

"It's not your fault."

"I have to do something. I just... I have to stop them."

"The last time you tried that they almost killed you."

"Well... that's okay. I mean... I've lived a long life, and if that is what it takes to stop them, to *try* to stop them, then... I mean... okay."

"It's not okay." she said. "Not with me. Brynne, I can't let you just

go off and get killed, honey."

"I have to do something."

"Then I'm coming along."

"No,"

"I'll bring a gun, and we'll be really careful."

"No. I can't let you do that."

"Well we'll get Barney and Mom and Dad to come, too. We'll outnumber them."

"They are faster and stronger and almost impossible to kill, Jess."

"I'm not letting you go."

"Well it's not like you can really stop me."

"You would do that to me?" I think she's crying.

"I don't know what else to do. I have to stop them."

"You would do that to Teresa?"

That's not fair. I just fell in love with her. And now Jess is asking me if I could leave her behind. Could I? I just told Jess I could put her through losing me, her best friend. What does it say if I can't do that to Teresa? Would Jess think Teresa means more to me than she does? I'm not even sure if she does. Jess is my best friend. Ever.

"Brynne,"

"It could save her life." I said. "It could save *your* life."

"We're not in any danger."

"Everyone is in danger with them around. They kill people, Jess."

"The police..."

"Can't do anything! They don't even know what these people are."

"Well tell them." she insisted.

"And be put in a mental hospital? Yeah, I'd do a lot of good there."

"You can prove..."

"Oh, so you want me locked up because I'm a freak and then probably executed."

"Honey,"

"Don't you think I've thought of all of this? Jessica, there is no other way. I just have to do it myself. I have to... to kill them."

"You're not a killer." she said softly.

"Well if I'm going to prevent them from killing others then I'll have to be."

"Promise me you'll wait. Just wait."

"I've *been* waiting, Jess."

"Two days. If I can't come up with something in two days then I'll stop arguing. I swear."

"Jess,"

"Please do this for me, Brynne. Please."

"I don't..."

"I am begging you, honey. Please. Give me a chance. I don't want

to lose you."

"Jess, I..." Is it too much to ask? To give her that much time? "Okay. I'll wait."

"Thank God!" she threw her arms around me.

"But Thursday I go."

"Hey," I felt her shaking me. "Wake up."

"Oh, hey, Teresa." I smiled up at her. "It's great to wake up to the woman you love."

"Yeah, anyway," She bent forward and kissed me and I wondered about morning breath. "Get up, get dressed."

"What time is it?" I mumbled.

"About nine. Come on."

"What? What's the hurry?"

"I need you to come with me." she said. She smiled, but her eyes looked scared. "Hurry up, make yourself pretty, okay? I'm going to the bathroom."

"Um, okay."

"Try to hurry, love."

I got dressed in a nice dress. I think the dress is pretty, anyway, and I always feel really good when I wear it. I wonder what she has in mind.

"Nice. Now hurry up and get ready."

"Where's Jess?" I asked.

"She wasn't here when I got here."

"Huh."

"Nobody was here. Where did they all go?"

"Peggy and Ted work. I don't know where Barney or Jessica are. Who let you in?"

"The door was unlocked. When you didn't answer when I rang the bell I got worried."

"So you just came in?"

"I had to check on you." She kissed me again. "Go, hurry."

"What's going on?"

"Just hurry."

I brushed and made my hair look okay. It's sort of a mess, but I managed to do okay with it. It's sort of curly, and being a redhead you have to watch out for Little Orphan Annie syndrome, but I think I avoided that. And then I finished up with a little makeup.

"Great, you look amazing." she said. "Come on."

"Wait!"

"We need to hurry."

"Where are we going?" I asked her.

"To Uncle Tony and Aunt Steph's house."

"I should leave a note."

"Well hurry."

I wrote a note, letting them know where I was going. I'm not sure I need to do this, but I know they'll worry. Especially Jess, because of

the conversation we had last night.

She hurried me along the sidewalk, not even noticing the sun. I did my best to stay in the shade of any trees, even cars we passed along the way. And then we got there. And she was so nervous she could barely stand up straight.

"What's going on, Teresa?"

"Okay, look," She said. She turned toward me and grabbed both of my hands in hers. "Mom and Dad came earlier than I thought."

"They're here?"

"And I want them to meet you."

"You don't have to do this right now if you're scared."

"I'm a little scared. Mostly that you'll hate them. Or they'll embarrass me."

"Are you serious?" I pulled her in and hugged her. "Don't worry about that at all. Even if I do hate them, I'll still love you."

"I love you, Brynne. We have to go inside now. I think."

"Let's do it."

We stopped at the door and she gave me another nervous smile. Then she opened the door and we went inside. Her parents were in the living room with her aunt and uncle.

"Hey guys." she said, interrupting them.

"Nice to see you again, Brynne." Mike said. "Steph, this is Teri's friend I was telling you about. Brynne, this is my wife Stephanie."

"Nice to meet you." Stephanie said.

"Sabrina, Bob, this is Brynne." he said.

"Hi." I said, sort of in a lame way.

"Nice to meet you." they both said at the same time.

"We need to talk about something." Teresa told them.

"Do you want us to leave you guys?" Mike asked her. He saw the look on her face. "No, that's okay, go on with what you were saying, we'll just stay."

"What is it you want to talk about, Teri?" her father, Bob, asked.

"For a while now I've been keeping something from you." Her eyes were watering. "Not... I didn't lie to you, okay, I just didn't tell you or correct you or anything."

"And what is it you've been hiding?" Sabrina asked her. She looks a little angry, or maybe worried.

"For like ever I've sort of known that I... um..." She turned toward Mike and shrugged.

"I believe," he said. "That your daughter is trying to explain to you that she is gay."

"Teresa?" Bob asked. She nodded and a tear rolled down her cheek. "That's quite a surprise." he said. His face is drawn, and he looks like someone kicked him in the groin.

“I’m not surprised.” her mother said, shaking her head. “Teri, choosing that way of life is a very bad idea.”

“I didn’t choose it.” she said.

“Teresa, you’re just a kid.” Bob said. “You’re confused. All the media and music videos and television shows may make it look cool, but you don’t have to pretend to be gay to be popular.”

“I’m not pretending, Dad.”

“Can I assume this girl here,” her mother said, motioning toward me, “is the one that talked you into this?”

“You guys need to stop and think before you talk.” Mike told them. “It’s not really helpful for you to keep talking about this like there’s something wrong with her.”

“There is.” Bob told him. “The bible says…”

“The bible also says that adulterers should be executed and you can't wear clothing of two different materials.” I said. “We don’t always follow the bible to the word.”

That’s a great way to start off. Mom, Dad, this is my girlfriend. Hello, and by the way I think all your religious beliefs are phooey. Nice to meet you.

“I see.” Sabrina said. “Do you study the bible?”

“I’ve read it a few times.” I said. “Listen, I respect that you’re religious, I respect that you worry about her, that you don’t necessarily agree with her giving in to her feelings for other girls like this, but it’s her choice.”

“It’s not a *choice*!” Teresa said.

“Hey,” I grabbed her hand and pull her over close to me. “I’m not saying being lesbian is a choice, just that you chose to not hide it.”

“Oh.”

“We’ll talk about this at home.” Bob told her.

“I don’t want to talk at home.” she told him. “There’s really nothing to talk about. I’m not asking your permission. I just wanted you to know.”

“Now you listen,”

“No!” she said, almost a shout. “This isn’t up for discussion.”

They blinked hard and glanced across at each other. I’m guessing she has never stood up to them like that. They don’t really seem to know what to do with it, either.

“Come here.” her mother said. She had her arms out. Teresa slipped from me and into her mother’s arms. “I love you, no matter what. I don’t like this, I’m not lying, but I’m always going to be here for you.”

“I don’t like this one bit.” Bob said. “But all I can do is give you my opinion.”

“So is Brynne your friend,” her mother, Sabrina, said. “Your

girlfriend? Are you two going out together?"

"I love her." Teresa said.

"Wow." Stephanie said. "That was fast. Well Brynne, I certainly need to get to know you, I guess. Jessica has told us so much about you already. But if my niece says she loves you, I really do need to know more, because that was really quick."

"Quick for me too, believe me." I told her.

"So," Bob said. "Is this feeling reciprocated?"

"Yes. Very much."

"I still don't like this." he said. "But if you're important to Teri, and if you two are going to... date, then you should have dinner with us so we can get to know you."

"Promise me you won't be rude." Teresa said.

We left after just a few more minutes. Teresa told them she'd be back in an hour or so, she just wanted to walk me home. And when we left the house she leaned against me and cried as we walked.

And I could still hear them talking in the house. Bob and Sabrina seem to agree that this is just a phase, that she'll grow out of it. Summer love, she'll be over it before school starts back up. Her mother thinks I somehow seduced her. Little do they know it's the other way around.

"When you come over for dinner tomorrow, can you try to look younger?"

"What?" That's new. I'm used to trying to look older.

"My parents think you're controlling me."

"Yeah," I said, and I almost told her what I heard them saying.

"If you look younger, more... vulnerable, maybe? Then maybe it won't seem like... like you're the one in control here."

"I'm *not* the one in control of this relationship."

"Well good," she said, smiling.

"How young do you want me to look? I'm told that when I'm not trying to look older I actually look younger than I really am."

"Well yeah, you do look younger than you are." she said. She smacked the back of my head softly. "Duh, Brynne. You're old."

She dropped me at home and kissed me. Dropped me at home. Home. I think that's the first time I've thought of it that way. At least automatically. It's nice.

There was still nobody home. I ate lunch by myself and watched the news. There were more attacks. It happens almost every day now. They aren't killing every one of them, but most. I really can't believe this. It's like all they do is attack someone in Joplin, then run to Tulsa and attack someone, then rush back to Wichita and attack someone. Do they ever stop to rest? Do they ever get full?

I fell asleep still worrying about what I may have to do soon.

Wednesday, June 15

I slept through the night. I don't know when the others got home, but they didn't bother to wake me. But I was awake before any of them this morning.

I hugged Jenna to me as I made my way downstairs for breakfast. I heard Ted get up and go to the restroom, so I started cooking some eggs for him and Peggy.

"Morning, sleepy head." Peggy said.

"Hey. I'm making eggs for you guys. They're almost done."

"Thank you."

"So where was everyone yesterday?"

"The kids went to see one of Barn's friends." Ted said.

"Yes." Peggy said, her distaste evident on her face.

"They brought back a wide array of... weapons." he said. "Most are probably illegal."

"They shouldn't have done that." I said. I put a plate of eggs in front of each of them. "I don't want them involved in any of this. I don't want any of you involved."

"You're too late for that." Peggy said. "Don't worry, Brynne, they're just trying to be prepared. Just in case."

"I won't let you guys get hurt for me." I promised her.

"I think we're all capable of making decisions on our own, young lady." Ted said. "We can't sit by and let them kill people, either."

I sat around all day and worried about them. And when I tried to ask Jessica about it she wouldn't talk about it. Eventually I decided it didn't matter, because tomorrow I'd leave and go find these monsters. Either I'd kill them or they'd kill me and it would be over.

Amid all these thoughts, I still had dinner tonight to get ready for. I tried about ten different dresses on to see which made me look youngest. I went with my brightest, youngest looking makeup, and I even put bows in my hair. Yeah, a little over the top, but I look about ten now.

I felt really nervous when I showed up at Teresa's family's house for dinner. Her aunt, Stephanie, answered and invited me in. She didn't say anything about how I was dressed, but I could tell she noticed.

"You're staying with Ted and Peg?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good people."

"The best."

"Are you happy there?" she asked.

"Really happy."

"Good. Have a seat, I'll let Teri know you're here."

"Thanks."

I sat on the sofa and watched some infomercial on television while I waited. She's in the back bedroom, I can hear her. And she is breathing hard, like she's nervous. Here she comes.

"Hey love," she said. She crossed to me and wrapped her arms around me as I was standing. "You look really nice. And young." she whispered.

"How are you today?" I asked.

"A little nervous. Please don't be upset if my family says or does anything tonight."

"It's going to be fine."

"I wish we didn't have to do this."

She wrapped her hand around mine and pulled me toward the kitchen. Everyone was seated there, discussing which college Andre should go to. They seem really tense.

"Hey," Teresa said. She looked over at her mother, but then quickly looked away, toward her Uncle Mike. "Where do we sit?" she asked.

"You can sit here." Teresa's dad said, indicating next to him. "And your friend will have to sit over by Andre."

"Dad, that's..."

"So Andre," I said. I gave Teresa's hand a little squeeze, and shrugged as I started past her. No point in starting an argument now, right? "How's your volleyball game coming along?"

"I still suck." he said, smiling.

"So you're still trying to figure out where to go to college?" I sat down and slid my chair up. "What are your options?"

"Mom is trying to talk me into the University of Georgia or maybe Florida."

"And me, being the sane one," Bob, said. "is trying to talk him into Texas."

"What are you even planning to study?" I asked Andre.

"He's not sure yet." his mother said.

Mike and Stephanie laid the food they had been cooking out around the table. It looks delicious. A pitcher of iced tea was placed on the table, and glasses were passed around.

"Bob, start us off." Mike said, grabbing the hand of his wife on his right and Teresa to his left. Everyone else was linking hands as well.

"Why don't *you* say grace, Brynne." Bob said.

"Um, sure."

Great. How do I do this? It's been a really long time. And if I say something stupid, it's going to be bad. Teresa looks terrified for me. That makes me feel just so much better, let me tell you.

"Um, bless us lord, and thank you for this great meal laid before

us. We give our thanks for our friends, and for the special ones in our life. Please help us all be good to each other, to be understanding of one another, and to forgive each other for any wrongs we do. We thank you lord for all the blessings you've given us. Amen."

"Amen." the others chorused.

Bob looked annoyed and Teresa looked relieved, so I guess I didn't completely blow it. I bet Teresa is like Jess, probably thought I'd burst into flames for daring to pray to God.

"So how did you two meet?" Sabrina asked me.

"We went shopping together with Jess and Tony." I said.

"So how'd you get from going shopping together to... to..."

"Dating?" Teresa asked her mother. "We just kind of clicked."

"Is that how it was with your past... relationships... past girlfriends?" Sabrina asked me.

"Subtle, sis." Mike said to her.

"I've never... um... dated before."

"How long was it before you decided to ask my daughter on a date?"

"I didn't ask, I..."

"Oh." she said. She looks confused. "I just assumed..."

"*I* asked *her* out." Teresa said. "Please stop this, Mom."

"Oh you..."

She nodded and buried her face in her plate. She seems a little embarrassed. I guess because she thought I somehow seduced her daughter, and now it turns out her daughter is the one that started this.

Bob and Mike started talking about fishing. It's weird how they can just talk about fishing strategy, about how to catch the best fish, what bait to use, right here at the table. It was actually starting to make a couple of people uneasy, judging from the looks on their face.

"So you talk about fish while we're eating chicken?" I said. "What, you can't talk about chicken, at least?" Everyone was looking at me. "Like, how would you go about catching a chicken?" I looked over at Mike and he shrugged. "No, seriously. Like, if there were wild chickens around, how would you guys catch them?"

"Good luck getting them to bite on your crappie jigs." Andre said.

"For birds you'd use a shotgun." Bob said.

"But doesn't that leave little pellets inside?" I asked.

"You just have to be careful while cleaning them."

"And birds bleed a lot more than fish." Mike said.

"Ugh, blood." I said, giving a bit of a disgusted shiver. Teresa laughed. "I think I'll take my chicken from the store, thanks."

"Usually in nugget form." Andre said.

"Exactly." I agreed.

After dinner we paired off and played Trivial Pursuit. Tony and Andre killed us all. Teresa and I didn't even have one piece of pie. And while we were playing, Teresa slid up against my side, and then later held my hand. Later still she had her arm around me. Her mother looked really upset at first, but she seemed to relax a little as the night went on.

"I've got to get going." I said. "It was nice to get to know you all better." I told them.

"It was good to get to know you." Stephanie told me.

"Come back any time." Mike said.

"I'll miss you." Teresa said. She kissed me on the mouth quickly. "Will you dream of me?"

"I'm sure I will."

"Sleep well, my love." she said. She kissed me again. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Her parents didn't like that real well. Bob at least seems to be able to hold his feelings about it in mostly, though. Sabrina looks angry, or disturbed somehow. But she didn't say anything about it. Not there in front of everyone.

"I'll give you a ride home. It's late." Sabrina said.

"Great, let me grab my shoes." Teresa said.

"No, I'll just run her home, you stay here."

"That's not necessary, thanks." I told her.

"I insist."

We got into their car and she asked how to get to the Sloan's house. I gave her directions, and she drove that way, very slowly.

"You seem like a nice girl." she said.

"Um, thanks." I guess.

"That's part of the problem. My daughter is not gay."

"Um, with all due respect, Ma'am, you're not really the one to say one way or the other. Only she knows what she feels."

"If she were to go out with a girl that was mean to her then maybe she'd get this out of her system, but she's going out with you instead."

"Sorry I'm nice." I said, trying not to be *too* sarcastic.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars to break up with her. To be mean while doing it."

"I... that's ridiculous." What nerve!

"A thousand dollars is a lot of money to someone like you."

"Like me?" Condescending.

"Your age."

"I don't want your money. I can't believe you'd think I'd do that. I love her."

"You don't know what love is, you're just a child."

"Fine, whatever. I know I care about her and she cares about me.

That's all that matters."

"Fifteen hundred."

"I don't need your money!"

"It's a lot of money."

"I... have a lot of money, and I don't need yours."

It was quiet after that. She can't buy me off, so she doesn't know what to do. What kind of person tries to get rid of their daughter's love interest by paying them?

I said I love Teresa. Do I? Do I really? Do I even really know? I care about her a lot. I mean I guess that's love of some sort. But does that mean I'm *in love* with her? I think I am, but we haven't known each other long enough to be sure. Great, now she's got me doubting our relationship.

"Is this the place?" she asked.

"Yes. Thanks for the ride."

"Brynne," She grabbed my arm to keep me from getting out of the car. "Don't misunderstand, please. I love my daughter, and I just don't want her getting involved in something she'll regret later. If she gets it in her head that she's gay then a year from now, when she figures out that she's not, she's going to feel trapped. She'll get depressed and embarrassed and not know what to do about it."

"Maybe she already knows herself better than you think." I suggested.

"You're a good girl, and if she were gay, I'd be thrilled for her to have someone like you. But she's not."

"Mrs. Bittel, Teresa told me she has always been attracted to girls. She's just been hiding it from you and your husband because she thought you'd have a problem with it. I'm *not* going to stop seeing her."

"Okay." she said. She let go of my arm. "I can tell you really care about her. All I can do is hope for the best, at this point. Don't tell her I offered you money, okay?"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

I went into the house, up to the bedroom, and climbed up to the top bunk. I wonder where Jess disappeared to. Not with Tony, he was still at home when I left. I need to talk to her. To someone, anyway.

I heard Barney come in. I guess he was driving Jess's new car. That's fine. At least until she gets her license. This sucks, I don't want to be alone right now. I guess I'll go eat a snack with Barney.

"Is that extra butter?" I asked. He was making popcorn in the microwave.

"Yeah."

"Can I have some?"

"Sure. Grab a bowl."

“So I need to ask you something.” I said. I pulled a bowl down from the cabinet. “I mean... well I guess I should ask if you’ve ever really dated.”

“Ha ha.” he said, sneering at me.

“No, no judgement, just... I was just curious. Hey, I’m like ten times your age and I’ve never seriously dated anyone.”

“Oh.” He dumped part of the popcorn into my bowl. “I went with a girl for a few weeks back in ninth grade. Other than that, just a few dates with different girls.”

“Did... did you love her? No, hey, really? I mean... I won’t tell anyone if you’re embarrassed or something, I just kind of... would like to know.”

“I thought so at the time.” he said. At least he doesn’t look too embarrassed to talk to me about this.

“So now?”

“Well,” He shrugged and shoveled his mouth full. “I guess so. I mean there are degrees of love, I think. Obviously it wasn’t enough.”

“So... what, like a friend?”

“More than a friend, I guess.”

He stared for a minute. It was making me a little uncomfortable. And then he moved over to a chair next to me, and his hand was on my shoulder, squeezing.

“Whatever is going on, it’s going to work out.” he said.

“Maybe.”

“So come on, what’s this about?”

“I told Teresa’s mom that I love her tonight. Teresa, not her mom.”

“Why is that a problem? I’ve heard you tell Teresa you love her.”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “It seems like a bigger deal now. Like it has some kind of permanence.”

“And you don’t really love her?”

“No, see, that’s the problem. I do. I think. But how much?”

“Okay.” he said. “Brynne, don’t sweat it. You don’t have to figure this all out. You’re young, you have time.” He made a sound resembling a laugh. “I guess *you* have a *really* long time.”

“*I don’t know what to do!*”

“Calm down. You don’t have to *do* anything. If you’re scared of how you feel, or you want to back out, just talk to Teresa. She seems like a cool chick, she’ll understand.”

“No, I... I just... I’ve never had feelings like this, I don’t know how to deal with it.” Great, I think I’m crying.

“Jeez, you really are worked up.” he said, laughing. “Relax. The world won’t end if you don’t figure this out tonight.”

“I know, I know.”

“Hey, you’re going to be fine. Just go with it and enjoy yourself,

whatever comes of this. Okay?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"It feels really weird giving you advice like this. You're really old, ya know."

"Oh thanks."

"Hey, you're looking good for your age, though." he said, laughing.

"Thanks, I guess." Still feels a little creepy to hear from him. "But like... I mean I don't know what's next."

"What do you mean?"

"We've started dating. I like her, she likes me. I mean we love each other, I guess. So what's next? I mean... what do we do?"

"Oh." He looks more confused than I feel. "Well just from what I've seen... and it's not like I watch, like, porn or anything, but..."

"I'm not asking about sex." Now would probably not be a good time to point out that I hear everything he does in his room.

"Oh." And now he *really* looks confused. "Well then what are you asking?"

"I mean... I mean is that the next step? I'm not sure I want that."

"You honestly haven't dated, have you?" he asked. I shook my head no. "Don't you even watch television?"

"But... I mean... do we just keep dating? Without... without like any goal in mind?" And what happens when she gets old and I still look fifteen? She *will* get older, and I'm still going to be the girl I am now.

"Spending time with her isn't enough?"

"Um... well of course, I just... I mean... okay." Yeah, he's right. Spending time with her is amazing. "So, yeah, um... thanks, Barney."

"Happy to help."

I went back upstairs to contemplate the advice Barney gave me. How did I get to a point that *Barney* gives me advice on my love life? I don't know whether to be impressed with him, and thankful, or really disturbed that I've sunk so low.

"You awake?" Jessica asked. It's after midnight and she's just getting home.

"Yeah. Where ya been?"

"Out." She tossed her purse on the desk.

"Obviously."

"With Alan Brite."

"I thought you and Tony..."

"Not really. I told you before, there's just nothing there. He's nice and all, but..."

"But just like a friend?"

"Yeah, I guess." She sat on the bed and slid her shoes off and started undoing her pants. She almost banged heads with me as she

straightened, I was hanging over the side. “How’d your night go?”

“Pretty good.”

“Uh-oh.” She gave me a sad look. “I know that tone.”

“No, it really went well, all things considered.”

“But?”

“Her parents don’t like me.”

“Then they’re stupid.”

“More specifically, they don’t like me *and* Teresa.”

“Oh.” She ruffled my still upside down hair. “They’ll get over it.”

“Her mother especially doesn’t like it. She offered to give me money to stop seeing Teresa.”

“Bitch.”

“And then she said something that kind of confuses me.”

“Well, you confuse easily, hon.” she said, laughing. “Just messing with you, Brynne.”

“No, it’s... sorta true. I’m easier to confuse than a lot of people that are fifteen. And probably more gullible, in a lot of ways. And definitely I get caught up in things and sometimes go forward with something just expecting the best to happen without ever thinking about the consequences.”

“So you’re fifteen.”

“Yeah. But... she said if Teresa really were gay then she’d be glad for her to have someone like me.”

“Doesn’t sound like someone that doesn’t like you.”

“Hence my confusion.”

“Just don’t worry about it. Take it as it comes, Brynne.”

“You sound like Barney now.” I slid off the top bunk and sat beside her. “I actually felt desperate enough to ask his advice earlier.”

“Wow. About what?”

“Um... how to move forward. Because... like... I sorta... love her. I told her mother I love her.”

“Oh.” She hugged me. “And you asked *Barney* for advice?”

I replayed the whole conversation with her while she finished getting ready for bed. She pretty much agreed with Barney on every point, which is still a little disturbing.

I slept fitfully. How do I do this? I laid there wondering what would happen if I tried to have a long term relationship with her. I mean... she’s going to age, and I won’t much. So at some point she’ll look like an adult who is dating a child. And she could get in trouble. And I mean... can I deal with being tied to someone so long? Like... this is already the longest I’ve been in one place in over a century.

Thursday, June 16

I woke up in the morning and laid in bed, listing to the television next door, which was turned up way too loud. The neighbors are watching the news. There's a new body down near Tulsa. They're trying to come up with a name for the serial killer, or killers, who is now on the loose in the area. They have experts talking about how to avoid being the next victim.

I heard Teresa on the sidewalk before she ever reached the door, but I stayed in bed and waited. The doorbell rang, and I could hear Barney moving to answer it. And then she came up the stairs and knocked on our door.

"Come in Teresa." I said.

"How'd you know it was me?" she asked. She closed the door behind her as she entered. "Two ways," I said. I sat up and turned to face her. "A lot of people have a pace to their

walking, each person is a little different. And of course that isn't foolproof, because people change their pace if they're nervous or excited, or tired or upset. Also, I could... um... smell you."

"Oh." she blushed.

"Actually, I heard you say hello to Barney when he answered the door, too."

"So... so I smell funny or something?" she asked. She looks upset now.

"Your conditioner has a distinct smell, that's all." I told her. I didn't want to explain to her that she does actually have her own scent. It would embarrass her even more.

She climbed up and sat next to me. She keeps fumbling her fingers together. And she's breathing erratically.

"So, um, are we still... still..." Her eyes closed, and I think she was trying not to cry. "I guess Mom and Dad were pretty rough on you." she said.

"It wasn't bad. Your dad, especially, seemed like he was okay."

"Yeah. Maybe. They both tore me apart. And then Mike and Steph got into an argument with them."

"I'm sorry."

"Mom forbid me from seeing you." she said. A couple of tears escaped her eyes.

"So this is a goodbye visit?" I asked. As much as I was trying not to let it show, you could hear that I was upset.

"No. I got all dramatic and told her I'd run away, or that I'd kill myself, that she couldn't keep me away. And even if she could, it would just be a different girl next time, it wouldn't change anything."

“How did she take that?”

“She whined a little. And then she nodded and said okay.”

“I’m sorry you argued with your parents, sweetheart.” I said. I grabbed onto her hand.

“I’m not.” She wiped her cheeks with her other hand. “Maybe it got it out of their system. Or maybe now they see I’m not kidding.”

“I hope so.”

“So um,” She glanced away from me. “When I woke this morning I had this really strong need to, um, have you kiss me.”

“Oh really?” I said. I smiled. “*Strong need*, huh?”

“Can you kiss her somewhere else?” Jessica said from her bunk below us. “I have a really bad headache.”

We quietly made our way out into the hall before I pulled her face down to mine and kissed her. We then went downstairs to try to dig up some food.

“Have you seen my keys?” Barney asked me. He was digging in the sofa.

“Nope, sorry.”

“Do you want us to leave the door unlocked if we leave, so you can get back in?” Teresa asked.

“The car keys.” he explained.

“Great, we just got the car and you already lose the keys?” I said.

“Check the laundry.” Teresa suggested.

He disappeared toward the back of the house. Teresa and I went into the kitchen and made some toast. Barney made a triumphant sound, and I heard keys rattling. And then he was in the kitchen.

“Good thinking, Teresa.” he said. “You’re girlfriend’s a life saver.” he told me, ruffling my hair.

“Yes, she is.” I agreed.

“How was Jess?” he asked. “She was up earlier, complaining about her head.”

“Yeah, she was complaining when we were up there.” Teresa told him.

“Damn.” He sighed and sat on the edge of the table. “I wish the doctor would call.”

“What doctor?” I asked.

“She didn’t tell you?” He looks confused. Probably because Jess and I share everything. “Wow. Well Mom took her to the doctor the other day when she was getting bad pains in her head again. They did a scan, they’re supposed to call and let us know if it’s back.”

“What’s back? What are you talking about?”

“Oh wow.” he said. He sighed again and ran his hands through his hair. “I can’t believe she didn’t tell you. All this time and she didn’t tell you. Even after you told her your deepest, darkest secret about

being a vampire."

"I'm not a vampire!"

"Right, whatever."

"So what's back? What's wrong with her? Is she sick?"

"I probably should let her tell you."

"Come on. Just tell me." I said.

"I shouldn't."

"Do you want me to make you tell me?" I asked.

"Huh." He laughed and slipped off the table. "You don't scare me, red." he said, ruffling my hair again. "I'll be back before dinner."

I couldn't eat after that. After hearing that Jess may be sick. If there's something wrong with her then why wouldn't she tell me? This can't be good. She's keeping secrets from me.

"If you don't eat, I'll give it all to Jenna." Teresa teased, pulling my doll over and pretending to feed her my toast.

"She's lactose intolerant, the butter would bother her." I said.

"What? Oh, ha."

I hadn't actually given it much thought, what I had just said. It wasn't some smart quip, it was just part of the story I had made up for Jenna over the years. She's lactose intolerant, she can't have peanuts, she gets a rash if she eats crab, things like that. But also stuff like her favorite food currently is french fries lathered in ketchup, but she can't stand them if there's too much salt.

"Can you stay here for a minute?" I asked Teresa.

"Um, yeah."

"Thanks."

I hurried up the stairs, faster than usual, and was in our room and sitting on the side of Jess's bed, probably before Teresa even realized I was gone. I reached of and put a hand on Jess's arm.

"What?" she shouted.

"It's me."

"Yeah, got that." Her eyes fluttered open and then closed again. "I don't feel very good right now, Brynne. Can we talk later?"

"Just tell me, okay. Just tell me what is wrong."

"I have a headache."

"No, I mean what... Barney said it may be coming back. What is coming back?"

"Jerk." she mumbled. "It's nothing, honey, just let me rest, okay?"

"Please tell me." My tears were now dripping onto her arm.

"Ugh." She scooted up to a seated position and grimaced. Her head must have hurt pretty badly. "When I was really little I had a tumor." she said. "It was tiny, and they took care of it."

"Cancer?"

"No. And it went away with medication. It shrank down, and I

haven't had any problems since I was six. Way before we ever met."

"What was it?"

"I don't know, I was six. This is just a headache, Brynne. I'm okay."

"Are you sure."

"Yes, honey, I'm sure."

"You have to tell me if there's something serious."

"I will. I'm sure it's just a sinus infection or something, okay? I'll be fine."

"Don't hide things from me, okay? I love you."

"Love you too. Now let me sleep. Please."

Teresa and I went to the park and sat and watched ducks. You'd think there would be children around, but there aren't any. Must all be at the pool, playing in the sun. Must be nice to not have to live in the shade.

"You ever wonder why we can't feed everyone?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"There's enough money and food in the world, we could feed every person."

"Oh."

"Ever think about it? I mean you must have some different perspective than I do?"

"Well," Thanks for pointing out that I'm old. "Who needs food?" I asked.

"What? Are you kidding! There are millions of pe..."

"Yes, but who?"

"People in Africa, people in Central America, even people here in the U.S."

"But who?" I repeated.

"I don't get it."

"Poor people."

"Yeah." she agreed.

"People with no power. So I think a lot of it is the people that have the money and the power to fix this problem just want to keep their power. Maybe they think if they give their money to feed these people it'll lessen their own power and they won't be so far above everyone else. They won't be so special."

"Oh. I guess." she said.

"Everyone wants to feel special."

"Yeah." Her face relaxed into a smile and she slid her hand into mine. "You're more special than most."

"I was thinking the same about you." I leaned over and kissed her. "Not everyone would have stuck around with me after finding out my secret."

"So I was thinking," she said. She looked away from me,

embarrassed I think. “Um, so you’re rich?”

“Why are people so hung up on money?”

“It’s that power thing you were talking about. Anyway, um, so... do you give any to charity?”

“I put part of it in an account with all the interest going to a few, yeah.”

“Why not just give them a bunch at once?”

“Because this way they get more in the long run. Just not as much all at once.”

“Oh.” She looked back at me. “Can I help? Like... decide where it goes?”

“It’s already set up.”

“Oh. But... but I want to help.”

“Tell you what,” I pulled her over against me. “I’ll have to get some of my stuff from a box at the bank in... Richmond... yes, those would be in Richmond. Once I get those out, we can go through some things and you can help decide who to help out.”

“Really? Cool!”

I tried to have fun with Teresa, but I kept thinking about Jess. She had a tumor and she never told me. I tell her everything. Except I guess I didn’t tell her about being whatever it is I am for a really long time.

I walked Teresa home and stuck my head in to say hello to her family. Mike and Stephanie seemed happy to see me, which wasn’t a huge surprise because I got along with them right away. What really shocked me was the huge smile I got from Teresa’s dad, and even a small smile from her mom. Maybe they aren’t as bad as I thought.

I went back home, to the Sloans'. Jess didn’t look so great. We all sat at the table in the kitchen, eating some casserole that Peggy made. Ted was making faces every time Peggy turned away. It was pretty bad.

“When will you know?” I asked. Everyone looked up at me. “Um, about Jess’s... whether she’s just sick, or if there’s something else.”

“It’s nothing, Brynne.” Jess said. She looks perturbed.

“The doctor said her scans came back all clear.” Peggy told me.

“Oh. Good.” All the tension left m body at once, and I suddenly felt like I needed to sleep. “I’m so glad, Jess.”

“Quit yer cryin’,” Barney said. “She’s not dying.”

“I was so scared.”

“I still think it’s funny that someone like you gets scared of anything.” he said.

“I’m scared of a lot of things.”

“Well no worries, I’m fine.” Jess told me. “I’m actually feeling a little better, anyway.”

“Thank goodness.”

“So I was thinking,” she said. She took a bite and held her fork up and out, daintily. “If it was a tumor, could you have saved me?”

“I don’t… know what you’re…” What kind of super powers is she imagining me having now? “Jess, this isn’t a little cut. I can’t lick you brain and make the tumor go away.”

“Ew.” Peggy said.

“Yes, thanks for that image.” Ted added.

“Do vam…” Barney began. “Do people like you ever die from brain tumors?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it.”

“Then the answer is simple.” he said, smiling. “You just have to turn her into a vampire.”

“I’m not a vampire!”

“Barney, don’t be so rude.” Ted warned.

So everyone is quiet. They all think I could just change her? That I would even think of making her like me? The very thought is just insane.

“So would you?” Jess asked, her voice weak and shaky.

“Never!”

“Oh.” She looks upset at that answer.

“Jessica,” Ted said to her. “She’s not saying you’re not worth it.” he told her.

“No, not… not even.” I said. “That’s not it at all.”

“I know.” she squeaked.

“You don’t want my life.” I told her. “Trust me.”

“You seem okay.” she said.

“Jess…” What? What do I tell her? “You have no idea what it’s like to be stuck. To be exactly the same, and know that you’ll never change. I’m going to be a kid for hundreds of years. You know how much that sucks? You know how lonely it is, knowing you can’t ever stay in one place more than a couple of years before people start to wonder why you’re not getting older?”

“But we’d be together.” she said.

“Jessica, stop it.” Peggy told her.

“Jeez, it was just a thought.” Jess said. She rolled her eyes. “I’m living anyway, so it doesn’t matter.”

That was disturbing. My appetite sort of went away after that. And then everyone was quiet, and it was all really tense. And then Jessica went to bed early.

I sat in the living room, sort of off to the side of everyone, and read a book. Barney sat with his parents on the sofa and watched another remake of a remake of an eighties movie. I couldn’t concentrate. I reread the same paragraph five times before giving up and just sitting

there, staring at the page, while I listened to Die Hard 11, or Rambo 15, or whatever it is they were watching.

I tried to be really quiet going into the bedroom after my shower. I'm very good at being quiet, it's something I've had a lot of practice at. But Jess was awake already. And crying.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked. I sat on her bed.

"Fine." she said. Sort of snapped, really.

"Head still hurt?"

"A little."

"Want me to get you something?"

"No." She turned her head away from me. "I'll be fine."

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well, Jess. If you need anything, just let me know."

"Goodnight."

I climbed up to the top bunk and tucked Jenna up under my arm. I pulled the blanket up, then briefly considered getting down and searching for the earplugs Jess got me. Instead I listened to Peggy and Ted whispering about Barney being lazy, listened to Barney watch some girl doing something obscene on his computer, listened to the neighbors argue about taking the trash out, and listened to Jessica trying to stop crying.

"I can't believe you'd just let me die." she whispered, her voice cracking.

"I'd do everything I could to stop that. You *know* that."

"Not *everything*."

"I'd spend every penny I have, physically force doctors to treat you, go find the best doctors and drag them back here if I had to."

"But you just don't want me around forever."

"Jessica," I slid off the top bunk and sat next to her again. "I would love to have you around." I put my arms around her. "I love you more than anything. It's just not right. You're supposed to grow up, you're supposed to have to worry about breaking your ankle if you do something stupid, you're supposed to be afraid of being shot, and eventually you're supposed to die."

"Great. Glad to know where I stand with you."

"Jess,"

"Look, just go to bed."

"But..."

"It's alright."

"I *hate* what I am, Jess. I don't want that for you. I felt so much better when I thought I was the last of my kind, that when I died that would be it. But now... I know I'm not the last, and it just... and then... I mean trying to make you into some unnatural creature... and... and then there's... I mean... I mean it would kill me to try to make you into

what I am. I just... I mean..."

"Want me to die in a few decades?"

"I wish I could explain this to you. You mean more than anyone ever has to me, but I won't risk killing you."

"Better that I die from something else?"

"Yes." That sounds horrible. "I could never live with myself. I mean... if I tried to save you by making you like I am, and I failed and just killed you, then I'd be the one that killed you. It's like asking me to shoot you in the forehead on the off chance that it'd get rid of the tumor and you'd still survive."

"Oh. Well I mean... I mean... I kinda get that." She turned toward me. "You really don't think you could do it, do you?"

"No."

"But you must have some idea how to? You said..."

"I said Alejandro almost always killed people when he tried. The fact that I survived was kind of a fluke."

"Oh. Alright. So... sorry I laid the guilt trip on you."

"That's okay."

I laid there in the bed for a long time, thinking about how awful it is that Jessica will one day be gone, and I'll be all alone again. Teresa will be gone, too. I'll be alone.

What if Teresa and I work out, and end up being together for a long time. She'll be much older than I am in a few years. Will she still want me? When she's thirty and I'm still fifteen, will she still want me? Will she think that I'm just a kid, and not want to be with me? Will it be disgusting, her being with someone who appears to be a fifteen year old? Will I still want to be with her when she's old?

Friday, June 17

"Wakey wakey." Teresa said. She kissed the side of my mouth. "Love, wake up."

"I... am awake, okay. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, thanks." she said.

"Sorry. I just... what time is it?"

"Almost noon."

"Seriously?" I sat up. "Wow, I'm so tired."

"She was tossing and turning all night." Jessica said. She was sitting at her desk, looking at her computer screen. "You were talking in your sleep, Brynne."

"Did I say anything I'll have to kill you for?" I asked. I slid off the bed, Jenna still tucked tightly in my arms.

"Who is Manny?"

"Manny?" Teresa asked.

"Um, well... oh."

"Cheating on me in your dreams?"

"Manny was a... um... long time crush, and one time fling,"

"Oh." She looks really upset.

"For Jenna."

"Your doll?" Her serious look faded and a slight, confused smile replaced it.

"Hey, Jenna has lived a very full and vibrant life."

"You're so cute." Teresa said. She leaned over and kissed me. "Eww. Go brush."

I went down the hall to the bathroom and brushed my teeth. When I got back to the bedroom, I caught the end of a very intense look that Jess was giving Teresa. And then Jess saw me and quickly turned back to her computer, moved the mouse and clicked quickly.

"So what are your plans today?" I asked Jess. I tried to look past her to see what was on her screen.

"I was thinking of seeing if Tony wanted to see a movie tonight. Until then, no plans."

"So what movies are on?"

"I'm not sure." she said.

"Well check the web site."

"Yeah, okay."

She opened the web browser up and navigated to the theater's website. She read off the names of the movies that were on, but I wasn't really paying attention. I reached down and grabbed the mouse from her. She didn't even try to stop me from going to the browser's history.

"Brynne, let's go for a walk." Teresa said.

"Hang on."

"Please, love. Stop." Teresa said. She yanked on my arm.

I saw the page loading, the headline talking about the vampire cult that continues to kill across the central plains, leaving a mass of victims all around, their latest victim found just this morning.

"So now you're hiding things from me?" I asked Jess.

"No, I wasn't..."

"And you too?" I asked Teresa.

"Because I know you'll just feel responsible." Teresa replied.

"Well thanks. I mean really, why wouldn't I appreciate my best friend and my girlfriend keeping me in the dark about something this important?"

"Love," She tried to put her arms around me, but I shoved her away.

"Just leave me alone."

"Honey," Jess said.

"You know what Jess? I think moving in here was a bad idea."

I left. They tried to follow, tried to stop me, but I'm much faster than they are. I ran, not caring much about where. Tears don't really run down your face when run that fast, the wind dries them.

I sat in the woods, alone, except for a fox that was watching me from the safety of a bush. If I can't trust them to be honest with me, how can I stay with them? Teresa I kind of understand, she hasn't known me long enough to know what this would mean to me. How hurt I would be. But Jess knows. Jess has known about everything for long enough to know that I do feel responsible, and I do have to do something, and hiding things from me just makes things worse.

The really sad thing is that I have to go back. For Jenna, if for no other reason. I've never left her behind. Not since I got her. She's the only consistent thing in my life. So I guess I'll just wait until everyone is gone sometime and go in and get her. I could leave a note for the Sloans, too. Let them know how much I appreciate what they've done for me. Let them know I'll miss them and will always think of them as family.

They *are* my family. It's horrible. So I'm just going to run away from them? Run, like I always do. Leave them here, vulnerable to those monsters to come after. I mean if they were watching that night that Jessica saved me then they know where the Sloans live. They're in danger. I'm just going to take off and let them die?

The map in my head didn't match with reality, and I had no idea where I was. It took me a little while to find a road I recognized. Once I did, I made my way back to the house.

"Brynne!" Jessica shouted when I walked through the front door.

"Thank God." Peggy said.

Jess bear-hugged me, the others were immediately surrounding me. Peggy and Jess were crying, Ted looked very happy to see me, and Barney looked like he was about two seconds away from crying, too.

"Um, hi." I mumbled.

"Don't ever run off like that again!" Peggy scolded.

"Sorry."

Okay, so they got this upset that I took off? Come on, really? Why would these people even care about me? I put them in danger. I invade their privacy, I invade their home. I don't get it.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the attack right away."

"Jess, no, it's okay." Wait, I'm supposed to be mad. "Just don't do that again. It's really important."

We all sat down in the living room, and I sat on the sofa with Jess and looked around. And started crying. These people love me. For whatever reason, they do. They really *are* my family. I'm so scared for them.

"I have to stop them." I said.

"You can't." Ted told me. "You're just a little girl."

"They're killing people, and nobody else is even close to being prepared to deal with it."

"There has to be someone else." Barney said.

"What about the people from the Vatican you said were looking for you?" Jess asked. "Surely they're looking for them, too."

"The Venator immortuorom. Jess, I'm not even sure they really exist."

"You could try to contact them." Peggy said.

"And tell them what? I'm sure they know about this, if they really exist. What can I add?"

"Then you just need to wait and hope they take care of it." Ted said.

"While those monsters continue killing?"

"You can't be responsible for everyone else, Brynne, only yourself." Ted told me.

"I just... I don't know. Look, I'm just... I'm going to go lay down for a while, okay? I didn't sleep well last night."

"We haven't eaten yet." Peggy said. What time... it's really almost eight? "We were too worried about you. Do you want us to wake you when dinner is done?"

"Um, yeah, I guess. Thanks."

I went up to lay down, and Jess followed. She's getting another migraine. I'm really worried about her. They gave her some super strong pain killers, but they don't help much. They just make her drowsy.

“Did the doctor have any idea why you’re getting these headaches?”

“No. He suggested stress, but that’s not it.”

“You sure? I mean… is my stuff stressing you out, Jess?”

“No, honey, that’s not it. Trust me.”

“But it’s not the tumor?”

“Nope. He said the scan was inconclusive, but he didn’t see anything. He wasn’t worried.”

“Good. Hey, I’m sorry for freaking out earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Was Teresa mad?”

“Just worried. You should call her later.”

I laid there, trying to rest and unable. Teresa is probably really mad, despite what Jess thinks. I’m really going to have to do something to make it up to her. But what? I could get her some flowers or something, but that seems so cliche. Still, she may enjoy it. I don’t know.

At dinner, We had mashed potatoes, gravy, fried chicken, corn on the cob, and rolls for dinner. It’s great. Peggy makes the best gravy ever!

“So I’m thinking you’re all right, I will have to call and try to tell these secret hunters, whoever they are, as much as I can. Maybe they can deal with them.”

“That’s the best plan, I think.” Ted agree.

“But…”

“There’s a but?” Jess asked.

“Yeah. I’m going to go take a look around. Maybe I can find something to help them. I need to make sure they’re staying in the same area I saw them before, anyway.”

“No.” Barney told me.

“I, um, wasn’t asking you if I could.”

“Honey, don’t.” Jess said. “Just call them now.”

“I can’t. I don’t even know who to call, anyway. And then there’s the other problem, anyway. I mean if I call them from here they’ll probably be on your doorstep in less than a day.”

“I can get you an untraceable phone.” Barney said. Everyone looked over at him. “What?” he said, mostly to Ted. “I know people.”

“Your gaming buddies?” Jessica asked.

“Yeah. In fact, Dan’s just across town, I’m sure I can have it for you tomorrow.”

“And how does Dan…” Peggy started. She shook her head. “Never mind, I’d rather not know.”

“Go ahead and get the phone.” I told him. “I’ll have to figure out who to call, I guess.”

After dinner I sat on the bed and tried to think. Of anything. Except I couldn’t. My brain went completely blank. This doesn’t happen to me very often. I haven’t slept, which I guess is why I can’t think.

Finally I got my brain to work well enough to call Teresa up and apologize for my behavior. Even though I still think I was right to be angry at them for trying to hide things from me. Anyway, it took like an hour of groveling to get her to forgive me. I think she actually had forgiven me after less than a minute, and the rest of the time she was just dragging it on so she could enjoy it. That’s okay.

Jess was still complaining about her head when we went to sleep. I felt bad for her, but there wasn’t much I could do. I pulled Jenna tightly against me and went to sleep. And I had dreams about Julius and Joanna attacking and killing Teresa, then torturing Jessica. I woke up crying, and couldn't get back to sleep for two hours.

Saturday, June 18

I woke about eight in the morning, actually feeling more rested than I had in days. There was sausage cooking downstairs, and my stomach was screaming for some. I got up and headed that way, noticing Jessica's absence from bed. When I got to the kitchen I saw that she was the one cooking the sausage.

"Make enough for me?"

"I did, actually." she said. "I knew you would smell it and wake up."

"It smells wonderful."

"Here you go, hon."

Halfway through the meal Barney came in. He whined about her not making enough for him, then started cooking his own. We were about done eating before he even got a chance to start.

"Phone's ready whenever you need." he said. "We just have to go to Dan's house to pick it up."

"Thanks. Maybe tomorrow. I think I'm going to run up there and check the place, see if they're still around first."

"Brynne!" Jess shouted. "You can't do that. I thought you said you would just call."

"No, I said I'd call. I didn't say I wouldn't go look also."

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" Barney asked. "You were pretty close last time, and I'm sure they'll complete the job next time."

"I'll be fine. Look, I think they stay in during the day usually anyway, so I'll be fine. I'm not actually going to confront them, I'm just snooping around to see if I can find out where they are."

"No." Jess said.

"Jess, I have to."

"Then I'm coming along."

"No, it's too dangerous." I told her.

"Either it's dangerous or it's not." Barney told me. "You can't have it both ways."

"Dangerous for *you*. I'm fast."

"So are they." Jess said.

"And we have guns." Barney added.

"Guys," I said.

"We're going, even if you don't want us to." Jess said. "Either you can be with us, or we can go alone."

"You guys, this is not your responsibility."

"It is now." she said.

"Yeah, you're family." Barney added.

So yeah, I'm stuck. Either I go along with them, so I can keep an eye on everything and maybe warn them before anything happens, or

I don't go, and I really need to be able to tell those Vatican hunters, the Venator immortuorom if there is such a thing, where they can find these horrible monsters.

We loaded up into the new, bright red car, with snacks and were just pulling away when Teresa showed up. Yay. I tried to figure out a way to tell her she couldn't come without hurting her feelings. I failed. So she came along too.

I was nervous when we started nearing Wichita. My friends, my family, were going to be in danger. This was a bad, bad idea. Plus Jess was getting a headache, Teresa was trying to talk us into going to the mall, and Barney was complaining he was hungry.

"Stop." I said. We were at a park that I had passed that night when I found them.

"What are you going to do, anyway?" Teresa asked.

"Try to find anything to show me they're still around. I mean... I don't know, exactly."

"Great, let's get cracking." Barney said. He pulled a gun from his pocket and chambered a round.

"No." I told him. All of them, really. "And we're not arguing that one. You just stay in the car, and if anything happens you step on the gas and don't slow down until you're back home." I kissed Teresa. "I mean it!"

"Yeah, yeah." Barney said.

I got out and walked through the park. I could smell something, decay or something. It wasn't really strong, but it was there. Like maybe they killed people nearby and then dragged them off. I heard a car door, and when I looked around, Jess was coming my way. Great.

When I turned back away from her, he was there. Julius. He punched me. I stumbled backwards and almost fell. He kicked out, catching me in the shins, knocking me to the ground. And when I looked around, I saw Jessica. Joanna was approaching her.

I tried to yell out to her, tried to warn her, but I couldn't. Julius was back on top of me. And it would do no good to warn her anyway, Joanna was way stronger and faster. There was no way for Jess to defend herself. I wasn't having much luck against Julius myself.

And then I heard gunshots. And screaming. And then Julius let go of me and was gone. When I rolled over and looked toward Jess, she was crumpled on the ground and Barney and Teresa were screaming and running toward her. Damn it!

"Jess!" I was there by her side almost immediately. "Oh my gosh, Jess. Oh Jess,"

"Are they gone?" Teresa asked, looking around. Her face was covered with tears.

"I think I scared them off." Barney said.

“Jess, talk to me. Jess!”

She was out. She was bloody and torn up. She looked bad. There were bruises all over. There had to be a lot of damage. I couldn’t tell how bad it was, but it was bad. I put my arms under her.

“You shouldn’t move her.” Teresa said.

“We have to get her to the hospital. And you guys have to get out of here.”

“Jessica,” Barney said. He slapped her face lightly. “Jessica, wake up.”

“Get in the car, Barney.” I ordered.

At the hospital, we sat around, waiting for word on Jess's condition. Mr. And Mrs. Sloan arrived after a while. The police had been and gone, listened to our story- mostly my story- of being attacked by some gang dressed like vampires. I figured that would be as close to the truth as we could get.

“How could you do this, Brynne?” Peggy asked me.

“I’m sorry.” I mumbled.

“We insisted on coming.” Barney told her.

“Nobody is to blame except those that attacked.” Ted said. “Let’s just pray for the best.”

Except the best wasn’t to happen. When the doctors came in to talk to the Sloans, he told them Jess has a broken back. She may never walk again. They won’t know until after swelling goes down some and they can do surgery, but he said the chances weren’t good for her. But she’s stable.

Peggy sobbed for half an hour. Barney and Ted held it in pretty well, but I guess I was sobbing too. Teresa was doing her best to make me feel better. It wasn’t working. I got my best friend paralyzed.

Ted and Peggy were allowed back to see her after a while. I wish I could die. Except that would leave them all unprotected, since I’m the only one that has an outside chance of standing up to those... things.

“This is not your fault.” Teresa told me.

“Yes it is.”

“It’s not.” She held my hand and cried with me. “I need to go home.” she whispered.

“Wait until Mom and Dad come back so I can get a status report.” Barney told her. “I’ll run you home after that.”

“Okay, thanks.” she told him. “Brynne, can we go outside to talk?”

“I need to stay here in case something comes up with Jess.” I told her.

“Brynne,” She sighed and glanced at Barney, then around the waiting room. We were alone, the three of us. “I can’t do this.” she said, her voice cracking. “I love you, you know that, but I can’t...”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Be... with you. Be around you. I’m sorry, I love you, but this... it’s too much. I can’t deal with this.” She was shaking now. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” I told her. “You just go back home, we’ll talk later.”

“No, you don’t... I mean... I hate this.”

“Oh. You’re... you’re breaking up with me?”

“I’m so sorry.” she said.

I was stunned. She is breaking up with me. I mean once I told her what I am and she seemed mostly unfazed, I figured she’d be okay. But now this. And I can’t blame her. But this sucks big time.

“It’s okay.” I told her. I leaned forward and hugged her. “I love you. I’ll miss you so incredibly much.”

“Me too.” she said, sniffling.

“I understand, though. This sucks.”

“I’m sorry.” she told me.

“No, Teresa, don’t be. You shouldn’t be around all this. Nobody should.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Listen,” I took her face in my hands and forced her to focus on me. “I’m not mad at you. I don’t blame you. I still love you, no matter what. This is for the best, because I want better than this for you. So you just go home, and go on with your life. Try to forget about me.”

“No! I’m not doing that. I don’t want that. I’m sorry.”

We got a status update from Peggy and Ted, then Barney took Teresa home. I had calmed down some, but when she walked out that door with him, I couldn’t stop from crying again. I’m going to miss her more than I would ever have imagined. The first time in my life I fall in love, and it ends this way. Now I really do want to die.

“You could fix her.” Peggy said softly. “Couldn’t you?”

“What? No, I... can’t do that.” I told her.

“You could try.”

“And kill her in the process. I won’t.”

“This is *your* fault, dammit!”

“Peg, stop it.” Ted said, pulling her against him. “She wants to see you, Brynne.”

“Yes, go look at the damage you’ve caused.” Peggy spat at me.

I couldn't disagree with her. It is my fault, and I did get my best friend paralyzed. I got the best person in the world hurt in such a horrible way. Why did I ever let the others come along?

I made my way back toward the ICU room that Jess was in. I thought they’d only let family in, but nobody stopped me or asked me. And there she laid, broken, tubes running out of her.

“Are you awake?” I asked.

“No thanks to you.” she mumbled, still groggy from the medication.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. You being sorry helps me walk again." she said.

"Jess,"

"Why couldn't you just call, Brynne? Huh?" now seeming more alert... and angry.

"I don't know."

"Great. Thanks." she said.

"I wish I could go back and undo this. Just call. First you get attacked, and then Teresa leaves me, and... this whole day is the worst day of my life."

"How do you think I feel?"

"Jess,"

"Look," Her focus on me intensified. "Would this happen to you--would you be paralyzed? Or would you heal?"

"I don't... know."

"We could find out." she said.

"Jess, no."

"You do this and you won't even do what you can to fix it? Great."

"Jess,"

"Great friend you are. You're no good to me."

"I am your friend. I'd do anything to fix you, I'd die if I had to, but I won't do *that* for you."

"Coward."

"I'm sorry." I said, crying hard again.

"You ever hear of you break it you buy it?"

"I can't do it."

"Just get away from me, Brynne. Just go away."

I wandered around Wichita for several hours, trying to find a way to make this up to her. Maybe I can buy her a mansion. A place she'll never have to leave, never would want to leave. Have everything brought in for her, so she'd never have to walk. It wouldn't make it up to her, but it would make things a little better.

Only it wouldn't. And she said her tumor could come back. This probably increases that possibility. I mean this will weaken her body, so that means it will probably come back. Maybe not. Maybe my best friend ever will be okay.

Barney was back when I got there. He saw me come in and came over to me, holding out a cell phone. He was already in the middle of a call. I took it and spoke to the people on the other end.

"Who is this?" a voice asked.

"Who is *this*?" I asked.

"You're the one that called me." he said in some kind of weird accent.

"Hang on a second, please." I said. I turned to Barney. "Who is it?"

“It’s your secret hunter group.” he said, a hint of a smile. “You don’t even want to know what I did to get through.”

“Hey,” I said into the phone. “So you’re the ones looking for me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m certain you do.” I stepped back outside, hoping nobody would hear me. “You're the Venator immortuorom, right? I’m a vampire.” Basically. Only not. But now is not the time to be picky.

“Oh really? And I don’t suppose you would care to prove that outrageous claim?”

“Look, I don’t have time to play games. The one that made me was named Alejandro, he said you were hunting him at the time. That was quite a while ago.”

“Uh-huh. Go on.” the man said.

“There have been a lot of attacks in the middle of the U.S.”

“You saw the news, too.” he said, still acting like I was a weirdo that was just making things up.

“I saw the vampires who did it.”

“Would you like to describe these attackers?”

“I can give you a lot more than that. Look, their names are Julius and Joanna. I met them because I was trying to stop them.”

“Oh, so you’re a *good* vampire?” he said, chuckling.

“I don’t attack people. I get my blood from blood banks. We can have this conversation in person.”

“You aren’t afraid we’ll kill you?” he asked, laughing.

“Look, kill me if you want, don’t kill me, I don’t care. But you have to stop Julius and Joanna. I can help.”

“Look, little girl, I don’t know what kind of fantasy movies you’ve been watching, but I don’t have time to play your games any longer.”

“It’s not a game. Call me back at this number when you figure out I’m not lying.”

I hung up. So they don’t believe me? Or are just covering their butts if I am a crazy? Who cares at this point. I’ll just have to stop Julius and Joanna myself.

“Thanks.” I told Barney. Peggy was giving me a hateful look again. “You really want her to be like me? You really want her to never grow up, to always be who she is right now? To have to leave so people don’t figure it out?”

“It’s better than the alternative!” Peggy said.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“This is all your fault! You have no right to talk to me like that.”

“Peggy, calm down.” Ted was telling her.

I went back to Jessica’s room. She was asleep. I contemplated letting her stay that way, but who knows when the nurses will start paying more attention to us again.

“Wake up.” I said, patting the side of her face. “Wake up right now.”

“I told you to go away.” she mumbled.

“I can’t.”

“Great. So you’re here to gloat about ruining my life?”

“Shut up.”

“Don’t *tell* me to...”

“Do you want this, or not?” I said. I dug into my wrist with an ink pen. Blood started gushing.

“Brynne!”

“Shut up. Drink.” I started to raise my arm, but she grabbed it with her hand.

“You said it would kill me.” she said, fear in her eyes now.

“Probably. You said you wanted to try.”

“Not...” She shook her head. “Not because I made you feel guilty. So don’t.”

“Do you want this or not?”

“I do. I don’t want to force you.”

“Just do it.” I told her.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I moved my arm toward her, then pulled back. “A couple of conditions.”

“What conditions?”

“You have to listen to me, at least at first. You don’t know anything about being what I am.”

“Okay.” she agreed.

“If this doesn’t work, and if there is an afterlife, then you save a seat for me. I’ll be right behind you.”

“You’re not killing yourself if this doesn’t work.”

“Drink, before it heals shut.” I lowered my arm to her. “It might taste bad.”

She wrapped her mouth around my wrist and started sucking. She made a face, but didn’t stop. It hurt and felt good at the same time. I watched the clock, guessing that somewhere between thirty and forty-five seconds would be the right amount. What do I know, though? And when the clock went past thirty seconds I tried to pull back, but couldn’t. She was holding my arm tightly, and I felt very weak. At forty seconds I tried to tell her to stop, and I couldn’t talk. At fifty seconds I let myself fall backwards, and she let go.

I stumbled out to the waiting room and fell into one of the chairs. Barney grabbed my arm and turned it over to see the partially healed scar. He gasped, and Peggy and Ted moved over next to me.

“Is she alive?” Barney asked, whispering.

“So far.” I mmbled.

I blacked out then. I dreamed of the vampire hunters coming and killing her. It was terrible. I kept waking and then falling asleep again immediately.

"Hey," I heard. Then I was shaken. "Brynne, honey."

"Jess!"

I jumped up and wrapped my arms around her. But then she had to hold me up, I was still weak. She lowered me back down to the chair.

"The doctors are trying to figure out how they made such a big mistake." she told me. She laughed. "It's weird getting used to feeling strong. When I first tried to move my leg it wouldn't move just a little, it was like a quick movement. Sort of all or nothing. But I'm doing better now."

"I'm glad you didn't die."

"Yeah. So I couldn't wait for you. I mean to find out... how to eat."

"Oh, so..."

"I slept after you left. And I woke up so hungry I could barely stand it. So as soon as I could get past the doctors, I went searching." She leaned close to me. "Mom has extra in her purse, in case you need it."

"Oh. Um... thanks."

"So you ready to get out of here?" she asked, smiling.

"I don't think I can stand."

"I'll help you." she said.

"Is it sunny out?"

"A little, but we're just going to the car."

"I don't know if you can handle it. If I remember right, I was pretty sensitive at first."

"We'll be careful."

"I'm so glad you lived." I told her again, crying now. "And yet really unhappy you have to be like this."

"Well if you're so sure I should only live as long as a normal person, you can kill me in sixty years." she joked.

"I'll keep that in mind. You remember your promise to listen to me?"

"Yeah, honey."

"Well that means no getting involved with the others. They'll kill you."

It was sort of quiet most of the way home. Peggy was crying silently in the front, and every now and then she'd look back at Jess, as if to make sure it was true. Jess complained that the glaring sun was hurting her eyes, even though it wasn't shining directly on us.

"You don't look so good." Jessica told me. We were just pulling into the drive at home.

"I'm really weak."

“As soon as were inside you should get some food.” Jess said.

“And sleep.” I added.

“But I have a million questions.” she complained.

“They’ll wait until tomorrow.” Peggy told her.

“I just want…”

“Leave the poor girl alone.” Peggy said.

“Yeah yeah.” Jess told her. “Ya know, I don’t really have to listen to you anymore.”

“Remember what I said about listening to me?” I said, waiting for her to nod. “Well they’re still your parents, so show some respect.”

“Sheesh, I was just kidding.”

“You should be happy you still have them. If we’re careful, we can come visit once in a while, and you can talk to them on the phone.”

“Do you have to leave?” Ted asked me.

“Not for a while, don’t worry. Maybe a couple of years.”

“Jess, get her up to bed.” Peggy told Jessica. “She doesn’t look well.”

So now Peggy is concerned about me? What, she hates me for what I did to her daughter, now she’s worried? I’m confused.

“Aren’t I supposed to be insatiable right now? Like suffering from some sort of blood lust or something?” Jess asked me.

“You watch too many movies.”

“I’m in the mood to play dominoes.”

“What?” She’s so random sometimes. “Aren’t you in the least tired?”

“I feel like I could stay awake for two weeks straight. Were you this wired right after?”

“Nope. Tired now. Stay home while I sleep, Jess.”

“But I’m bored.”

“Jess,”

“Okay, okay.” She bounced up on the bed, beside me. “I’ll stay out of trouble, you just sleep hon.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you like my mom, or something?” she asked. “In vampire terms?”

“I’m not a vampire!”

“I’m serious, though.”

“Who cares, Jessica? I changed you. So?”

“Okay, okay. Sleep tight, mom.”

Mom. Great. Like I need her calling me something stupid like that. This is going to be a very stressful decade. Why did I condemn her to this? Why did I give in to the selfish feeling of guilt I had?

I was dreaming of Jessica. She was slaughtering an entire village. We were somewhere in Asia, and the people were screaming and

running every which way, confused. I called out to her, trying to stop her, but I couldn't. And I couldn't physically stop her, either, because she was stronger than me.

I woke to the sound of crying. I was still weak, still really drowsy and half asleep, but I could at least tell it was close. That it was Jess. Oh there was crying farther away, but Jess was crying too. And making a low grumbling sound, like she was fighting back sobs, trying to keep quiet. I slipped from the bed and sat next to her on the lower bunk.

"How can you handle this?" she said. "Make it stop, Brynne."

"Jess,"

"How do you handle all this noise!?" She gripped her hair with both hands, and for a moment I thought she'd pull it out without realizing it. "How do you handle *my PERVERTED BROTHER*?" she asked, loudly. "Is it always like this?" I heard Barney shut down the video he was watching.

"Calm down."

"I can't calm down!"

"Hey, come on. You'll get used to this. It'll get easier."

"I can't stay here. I have to go somewhere. Somewhere quiet."

"No, come on, just calm down. Shh."

"I can't." She was shaking and crying. "It hurts, Brynne."

"I know. I know, Jess. Just *try* to relax. Trust me."

"I can't deal with this, I... I just... "

"Hang on." I got up and got her walkman. "Try this."

"Add more noise? Great plan."

"Crank it all the way up and put the headphones on."

"But... won't that hurt? My ears are really sensitive now."

"Yeah, it's going to hurt a little. But it should block everything else out, hopefully. At least mostly."

"Okay. Okay." She took a deep breath and let it out. "Sorry I woke you, honey."

"It's okay. I'm here, I'm going to help you with this."

"Okay. I love you, Brynne."

"Love you, Jess. Now try to relax. Lay still, see if you can sleep."

"But..."

"I know, you're wired, but just try."

Monday, June 20

"Wake up, ma." She shook me. Hard. Like, the wood on the bedframe cracked.

"Don't call me that."

"Sorry. Let's go, let's go."

"Go where?"

"I don't know!" She was practically bouncing off the walls. "I need to test this out. How strong am I? How fast can I run? How far can I see?"

"There's a lot of time, Jessica."

"I know, I know."

"Calm down."

"Yeah, okay." She moved very quickly to a seated position on the bottom bunk. "Sorry honey."

"Lesson one:" I said. I slid out of bed and sat beside her. "Take your time, you have plenty of it."

"Right." She said. She blew out a deep breath. "So are you ready?"

Wow, she's really excited. Okay, okay. But I am making her wait for me to eat breakfast. If she wants to eat, she can. If she doesn't, then I'll have to talk to her about sometimes doing things to keep appearances up.

After I ate, we headed outside. I had to remind her to stay in the shade. Especially the first few days. And then, while we headed out to the middle of nowhere so nobody would see us, I listened to her prattle on about hearing her parents brush their teeth this morning and how amazing it was to hear the seatbelt click when they left for work.

"Okay, are we far enough out now?" she asked. Or begged.

"I suppose."

"So what do I do?"

"Well what do you want to do?"

"I want to see how strong I am."

"So go to it."

"But how?" she asked.

"I don't know. Pick that boulder up." I said, pointing at a huge rock.

"Are you sure?"

"Go for it."

She stepped over close to the rock and bent forward. She looked at it carefully, then sort of squatted in the proper 'don't hurt your back' position. And then she lifted it. Easily. And then dropped it.

"Oh my goodness!" she squealed.

"Wow, I'm impressed."

"Well it's not that big. It's like, what, two hundred pounds?"

"Probably more." I said. "You couldn't have budged it yesterday, and you easily lifted it today."

"Yeah. Cool!" She turned to me. "Can you pick it up?"

"I guess."

"So try it."

"What?"

"What, are you afraid I'm stronger than you?" She started laughing, but not at me, mostly just out of the weirdness of it all. "*AM I* stronger? Like, are new vam... whatever we are, stronger?"

"I don't think so. Sorry to let you down."

"So pick it up."

"Seriously?" I asked "You're going to make me get my hands dirty?"

"Baby."

I bent forward and grabbed the rock. And I lifted it, but it was everything I could do to get it off the ground. Great, she really is stronger than me. Just like in the stupid dream.

She was laughing. Not a little, either. Practically rolling on the ground. I was actually sort of embarrassed. And then she tried to get it under control, and resorted to occasional snorts.

"Shut up." I told her.

"Sorry, honey."

"You still have to listen to me."

"Yeah, sure. Hey let's race! Maybe I'm faster than you too."

"Jess,"

"Come on, scaredy cat."

She took off running, and I chased after her. And she *was* faster than me. Oh man, this sucks. So what, she's going to better than me at everything? This isn't happening. I'm not used to being bested physically. First Julius and Joanna, now Jessica. Maybe it's the name starting with J. I think I'll change my name to Janelle or Josephine or something.

"I still know more than you." I told her, when I caught up.

"Yeah, but I can learn. Will you ever get faster?"

"You suck."

"So far just those little packets." she said. She made a face. "The taste is pretty bad, isn't it?"

"You get used to it."

"Is it any better right from the source?"

"You will never find out, hopefully."

"So what's next?"

"I don't know, Jess. I've never actually tried to teach anyone this stuff. You just have to kind of learn. Like... don't do anything extreme.

If someone is pushing you around, it's kind of best to let them. It makes you appear weaker."

"Yeah, I already picked up that you do that, hon."

"Don't run fast around others. Basically you have to do your best to appear a weak, clumsy, normal girl."

"That clumsy thing may work for you, but it's not my style." she said with a laugh.

"Well you need to try."

"Do I have to be as bad as you? Can't I just try to act like I always do?"

"You can try, I guess."

"So," She reached out and ruffled my hair. "What do... our kind do for fun?"

"Watch movies. Shop. What did you expect?"

"I don't know."

"Are you ready to go home? I'm still kind of weak."

"Oh don't use that for an excuse, you know I beat you."

"You did. But I need to rest. And maybe eat again."

We walked home. We were several blocks away and I saw Barney in the front yard, putting something on the post for the mail box. He was bent forward, his pants slid down in the back.

"You're brother is disgusting." I told her.

"Yeah." she said. "What brought that up?"

"His pants." I said, pointing.

"Huh?"

"Look, he needs a belt. Maybe I'll have to buy him one."

"I don't..."

"Oh wow, you're kidding!" I said, more excited than was really warranted. "You can't see him."

"See who? Is he somewhere?"

"Oh ha ha! You were so certain you were better than me at everything."

"He's in the front yard?"

"Yeah, are you blind?" I said, laughing again. "I have better eyesight than you. A lot better, apparently, since I saw him a while back."

"So?"

"Oh I get it." I said. I stopped walking. "You're stronger than me because you're bigger and stronger than I was as a human. You are faster because you're faster than I was before. But I had eagle eyes before my change, and you have glasses that you refuse to wear."

"I don't need them."

"*Now* you don't."

"I didn't before. The eye doctor even said we could wait, they

weren't that bad. Mom insisted I get them. Ya know, I did notice that I looked different when I looked in the mirror earlier. Like... smoother, or something. But it was like I could see every pore."

"You're eyes are better, just not as good as mine. And you do look a little different. Anyway, I had perfect eyesight, and now I have much better eyes than you."

"I'm still faster and stronger." she mumbled. She's mad. "So seriously, we can't read minds, or compel people to do things, or see the future or anything?"

"Nope."

"Well what good is all this then?" she asked, laughing.

"You live a long time, you heal quickly, you get to be strong and fast and a lot of normal rules of society really don't apply to you anymore."

"What kind of rules don't apply?" she asked.

"Stuff like age requirements. Come on, I'm over eighteen. But I still have to work hard and come up with a really good fake ID to get into an R rated movie."

"So can we just take stuff?"

"There are times when it can be necessary. But that doesn't make it right. So we don't do that, unless absolutely necessary."

"Right. So can I skip school now, 'cause I'm really not feeling it. Why do I need a senior year?"

"School is healthy. It lets you be around others your own age."

"But they already bored me before. What's it going to be like in ten years?"

"Oh."

Well I explained this before, but maybe she didn't understand what I meant. It's really difficult to explain to someone, but I can try. And I hope she isn't upset by this.

"You're stuck, Jess." I told her. "At seventeen. For a very long time."

"I know."

"No, I mean... look, this sounds messed up, but if your experience is anything like mine, you're going to stay interested in things seventeen year olds are interested in. Over time a lot of things seem to fade away, and you don't really get older. I mean even in your head."

"Right, got it."

"You do gain knowledge. Sometimes. But even some of that fades if you don't continue to use that knowledge. It's really hard for me to remember stuff from when I pretended to be older and went to college, for instance."

"Got it."

"I don't think you do. But you will."

“Well then,” she said. “You seem much more responsible and in control than most fifteen year olds. Are you saying you haven’t developed?”

“It’s out of necessity. And fear. When I let myself relax, I get very much like I was before. I was a little immature, to be honest.”

“Got it. Oh I can see Barney now.”

“About time.”

We were back up in the bedroom, her sitting at her computer while I was getting undressed so I could take a nap. She was looking at travel sites. Apparently she thinks we’re just going to take a long vacation now.

“Wake me up in time for dinner.” I told her. “I don’t want lunch.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, and Jess?”

“Yeah.”

“Please stay home. At least for a few weeks, until you get a better hang of everything, I’d feel better if you didn’t go anywhere without me.”

“What’s to get the hang of?” she asked.

“Controlling yourself, mostly.” Plus I worry she’ll slip and attack someone out of some weird bout of hunger. Hey, I never saw someone right after they changed before, so maybe that blood lust things isn’t as far fetched as I thought.

“I can control myself.”

“I know, Jess. Just humor me?”

“Yes Mom.”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Okay, okay. Sleep well.” She leaped over to my side and hugged me. “I’m really glad you did this for me.”

“Yeah.” I’m not. “I’m tired.”

“So should I get a doll now, too?” she asked. She laughed. “Maybe it’s a vamp thing. Maybe we all have them, and you’re not just being a little kid.”

“I’m not a vampire.” I said. I laid back and closed my eyes.

I’ve condemned her to this. To watching everyone she loves dies. To never feeling safe. To never being normal. To never being able to lay out in the sun ever again. To always and forever being a cannibal. As much as I try not to think of it like that, it’s what I am. I live off of human blood. I’ve condemned her to never being able to love.

I dreamed of perfect days and perfect nights with Teresa. Of long walks in the parks, of snuggling up to watch movies. Of love making. Of long vacations to places I’ve never been. I dreamed of mundane things, like her and I folding laundry and doing dishes. And then I woke up crying.

“It’s okay.” Jess was saying to me. It sounded like she had said it several times already by that point, based on the tone of her voice. “Everything is fine, honey.”

“I hate this.” I mumbled.

“I know.”

“You don’t know! She left me. She left me because of this, because of me being whatever the hell it is I am.”

“She loves you, Brynne. She just can’t handle it.” She patted my hand. “Maybe after she has time to think…”

“It’s too dangerous for her. She needs to go away and never think of me again.”

“Honey,”

“And I’ve condemned you to the same thing.”

“You don’t know that. I could find a perfect guy somewhere, and he could be alright with this.”

“And he grows old and dies while you remain seventeen years old.”

“Well that’s depressing. Maybe I could change him too, and then we…”

“No!” I sat up. “Don’t ever think of doing that!”

“Relax.”

“I shouldn’t have done this. I shouldn’t… I felt so guilty, and so alone, and… now I’ve turned you into some… some unnatural creature.”

“Brynne, stop it.”

“And you can never have love now. That’s the worst part.”

“I have you. I love you.”

“But you’ll never be able to be in love with someone, never be able to have someone be in love with you. You’re alone now, too.”

“I’m sorry, honey. I really wish Teresa…” She stopped when the phone started ringing. “Maybe that’s her. It rang before, when you were asleep. Maybe she thought about it, and she wants you back.”

“That’s not… that’s… is that the phone Barney got me?”

I looked over at the phone, on the dresser. Watching it from over here won’t really do any good, I guess. I should answer it.

“He-hello.” I said. I leaned against the dresser.

“We need to talk.” he said. Heavy Italian accent.

“Who is this?”

“You called my colleague Saturday.” he said.

“Um,” His colleague. Hah. “I talked to someone Saturday.”

“Is this the girl that claimed to be a vampire?”

“Not exactly.” I said. “Close enough.”

“Close enough?” he asked.

“I don’t like to think of it that way. I don’t attack people, I just get

my blood from blood banks." Why do I have to keep repeating this? I went over a hundred years telling nobody, now I seem to have to tell everyone.

"We need to talk in person." he said.

"No, not... look, I... you have to stop them. The ones in Wichita."

"We'll talk about that. Where are you now?"

"Look, I... I'll come to you. Pick a place."

"Miss, this is no time to play games."

"My name is Brynne." Brilliant. They just need to look for every Brynne in Kansas. There can't be that many of us. "To whom am I speaking?"

"My name is Paolo." he said. "And the rest we can discuss in person. Where can I find you?"

"So you can come kill me?"

"Brynne," he said. He sounds like a salesman, even with the accent. "We simply want to speak with you."

"Look, I don't even care any more." I said. "Kill me, whatever."

"No!" Jess shouted.

"But I have some ground rules."

"Such as?" he asked.

"You wait until after I help you hunt down Julius and Joanna."

"That can be arranged." he said. His salesman voice makes me doubt his intention on following through on that, though. "Now let's meet."

"The people that have been helping me, you have to leave them be. They are good people, you need to promise they won't be harmed."

"I promise."

"Okay. Okay. There's a rest stop on highway four hundred, a little East of Wichita. I'll meet you there tomorrow at noon."

"Keep in mind, we will be protecting ourselves, should you decide to try anything funny."

"I won't."

"See you tomorrow, then."

"Wait!" I said, hoping he wouldn't hang up.

"Yes?"

"How will I recognize you?"

"We will see you." he answered.

"Well don't you want to know what I look like?"

"I imagine you'll be the only vampire there, won't you?"

"Yes."

"We'll see you tomorrow."

He hung up. Jess was looking at me, waiting for details. Dripping with curiosity, I would say. She looks scared. Or excited.

“So we go at noon.” she said.

“No. *I* go at noon. You’re not going anywhere near there.”

“I’m not staying behind.”

“You need to stay here. They could kill you, Jess. You’re not having anything to do with those people.”

“And they could kill you, too. I’m not just sitting by and letting that happen.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“I agreed to do what you said, Brynne, but I’m not letting you go off alone like this.”

“Jess,”

What, it’s dangerous? Telling her that won’t help. So what do I tell her? I mean if she comes along they might very well kill her. I’d rather they not even know she exists. But I have to tell her something.

“You have to stay behind to protect your family.” I told her. “In case the others come looking.”

“That’s a lame excuse and you know it.”

“Jess,”

“I’m coming.”

“No.”

“Yes.” she insisted.

“You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s too dangerous.” I wasn’t going to tell her that. Great. “Look, I… if you come then they’ll just kill me on the spot because I changed you.”

“You think they’d do that?”

“They might.”

“Then you can’t go!” She grabbed onto my hand. “You’re not leaving me. I can’t do this by myself.”

“Jessica, they aren’t going to hurt me as long as they think I can help stop the others.”

“Are you sure?”

“He promised.” Well, not exactly.

“I don’t like this.” she said.

“Me either. But it’s the only way.”

“I hate this.”

“Look, I’ll be able to concentrate much better if I don’t have to worry about you or your family. So stay here. Maybe go check on Teresa, too. Secretly, of course. Just go visit Tony and check on her while you’re there.”

“Honey… okay. You swear you’ll be okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

The evening was kind of tense. *Really* tense. Jess told her family I

was going tomorrow, and they all spent the whole night trying to talk me out of it. And Barney wants to go along. I tried to explain to him how dangerous it was, but he won't listen. I don't really have any way to get there, other than running anyway, so I guess he can drive me. They won't hurt him. I don't think they will, at least.

Tuesday, June 21

We were most of the way there, and I was really nervous. Barney kept talking about

football. I don't know why he keeps talking about football, but he does. I'm getting a bit sick of it. I suppose he's trying to distract me so I don't worry, but it's not working. I hate football.

My phone started ringing. It's really not a good time to talk. But I have to make Jessica feel better. I have to calm her down. Even if I'm not calm. She needs that from me.

"Hey Jess. Look, we're almost there, I can't talk long."

"Hey Love." she said. Not Jessica. "It's me." She's crying.

"Teresa!"

"I'm sorry I freaked out."

"No, it's okay baby." I said.

"Brynne, you be careful. Jess told me what you're doing."

"She did?"

"Yes. Please don't die."

"I'll do my best."

"Good."

"Teresa, are you... un-breaking up with me?"

"What? Um..." she sniffled loudly. "I love you, Brynne. But I can't be with you. I'm so sorry. But still, I don't want you to get hurt."

"Oh." Well that sucks. Rip my heart out all over again. Thanks. "I love you. I gotta go, we're there."

"Let me know you're alright?"

"I will."

"Bye. Love you."

We pulled into the rest stop and Barney found a parking spot. I looked around at all the people. Which of them are from the secret Venator immortuorom? Would they kill me in front of all these other people? Unlikely, but who knows.

"Stay in the car." I told Barney, as I opened the door.

"No way, I'm coming with you."

"Stay. I'm serious."

"Hey,"

"Barney, you have to go home and tell them what happened if this goes badly. You have to tell Jessica to run away. You have to protect your family."

"This sucks." he said, slamming his fist on the steering wheel.

"I know. Keep the car running. If anything goes wrong you just run."

I walked up the sidewalk, trying to look at every person I passed, trying to see if I could find anyone that looked foreign. Whatever that

means. I sat on a bench and waited. Less than a minute later a man sat beside me. He glanced my way and smiled. I wasn't sure if he was one of them, or just a pervert that tries to pick up young girls.

"Nice to see you, Brynne." he said. Heavy accent. Same guy from last night.

"Paolo?" I asked. He nodded. He looks as nervous as I feel. "How did you know it was me?"

"We will wait until the others leave before our discussion, yes?"

"Sure, I guess." Wouldn't want anyone to get hurt. "But you knew who I was?"

"Yes." He glanced around. "You people have a look. A perfectness."

"Oh."

"It is a pity that this disease which afflicts you seems more common among the beautiful. I suppose if you're going to create someone as a companion you would choose someone beautiful."

"I was a mistake. Alejandro tried the rest of my family, too."

"Alejandro ." he said, nodding.

"He said he was the last. I thought I was the last, after he died. Until recently."

"There are a great many of you around." he told me. "So you know only of these two?"

"Um," Yeah, except the one I changed. "Yes, those two."

"There are more. You aren't completely honest with me, I think."

"It's not important." I told him.

"It is very important. This will go badly if I don't trust you, Miss Brynne."

"Fine. There is one more that I know. I will not tell you who she is. She doesn't hurt people, that's all you need."

"And where did you meet this other one?"

"Not important."

"It is." he insisted. There is an intensity in his eyes that scares me.

"I'm not risking her life by telling you about her."

"Fair enough." he said. "And did you create this other?"

"I..." I nodded. "How did you know?"

"A hunch. Is she the only one?"

"Yes. I didn't even know how, but I had to save her."

"So this is your injured friend, Jessica Sloan, yes?"

How does he know that? Have they been spying on me? They probably *did* check me out. Or maybe they were able to trace that cell phone and find out that it came from that hospital. It wouldn't take much to find out that there was a girl there that was badly injured, but suddenly okay the next day.

"Relax." he said. He is smiling. "We're just talking now."

“Relax. Easy to say when you’re not the one who is going to die.”

“Nobody dies today.” he said.

“She can never… you can never hurt her.” I said. I wiped the tears from my face. “She’s the most gentle person, you just… she would never hurt anyone. I promise you.”

“We will see.”

“No!”

“Calm yourself. There are others here that should not know of this.”

“If you want my help… I don’t even care about me, okay? You do what you want with me, but you have to promise me, you have to swear to me, that you will never hurt her.”

He stared at me for a long time. After a while he smiled a little and leaned back. He shook his head and looked up at a man that was standing maybe twenty yards from us. They both shook their heads and shared a laugh. And then Paolo scooted a little closer to me.

“I have never met one of you quite like this.” he told me.

“Like…”

“Gentle. Concerned. Civilized. I’m starting to believe what you said about not hurting others. This does not sound like someone who learned from your Alejandro.”

“How do you know…”

“We have a long record on Alejandro. He was brutal.”

“He wasn’t always.”

“Still, someone like you coming from him is amazing. You know it is almost unheard of to create someone so young as you. Most want a companion that is full grown. Able to reach their full potential. You would be no good in a fight.”

“I’m strong.”

“Stronger than most humans, perhaps.” he said. “Not as strong as most adult vampires.” he said.

“I'm not a va…”

“Most vampires are very territorial. It is hard to believe you survived meeting Julius and Joanna.”

“I nearly didn’t.”

“You have never attacked people for blood?” he asked.

“I… haven’t for a long time. It wasn’t always so easy to get blood from a blood bank.”

“So you have killed?”

“Not on purpose. It’s been a long time, and I… I didn’t kill to eat, just in self defense.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “You didn’t kill those you drank from?”

“No.”

“Never?”

"Um... a couple of times at the very first. But I didn't know what I was doing then, and Alejandro was no help."

"And you think your friend will not kill others?"

"Not if I help her." Of course if they kill me that means they'll kill her, probably. Because they'll think she can't control herself. "She wouldn't anyway. I've explained how to get blood other ways, and she would never attack someone. You can't hurt her. Kill me if you have to, I deserve it for the things I've done, but she doesn't."

"We will see."

We will see. Yeah, 'cause I'm going to put her life on the line for a 'we will see'. This can't happen. Maybe I should signal for Barney to go now, so he can go warn her to run. Or maybe I should just run now. But I can't let Joanna and Julius keep killing.

"So look, put me in hand cuffs, chain me up, give me poison that doesn't kick in for a few days so I have time to help you get these two before I die, I don't care. But if you don't promise that Jessica will be left alone, I'm not helping you."

"What would you like from me, Miss Brynne?"

"Just swear to me that you will let her go. If you promise that then I'll believe you. You work for the Vatican, right? I'm sure they would look down on you lying like that, right?"

"You complicate things, you know?" he said. He leaned back and stared at his friend across from us. After a moment, he turned back to me. "This is not something I take lightly." he said. "If your friend does not harm others, I promise you I will do what I can to make sure she is not harmed."

"You swear?"

"Yes. Our mission is not to kill indiscriminately, it is to protect from those that are a danger. You tell me she is not a danger, yes?"

"Jessica would never hurt anyone. I swear to you."

"I believe you." he said. "Now tell me about your previous encounters with these Joanna and Julius."

I filled him in on everything. I even told him about their attack on me at home, how they were enjoying torturing me and how Jessica showed up and startled them enough that they left. He was amazed that she was brave enough to help me back to her house at such risk to herself.

By that point in my story his buddy across from us had made it all the way over to us. He had been inching forward since I began telling about the other two, and now he sat beside me.

"Miss Brynne, let me introduce Benito." Paolo said.

"Um, hi." I said.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." he replied. He also had an italian accent, and his was stronger. "Please, continue."

I filled them in on everything else I knew about Joanna and Julius. They asked questions when I told them of the attack in the park. Apparently Joanna and Julius were inexperienced at living alone. They said experience vampires would not be so careless about leaving victims laying around to be found. Experienced vampires wouldn't have been toying with me, they would have just killed me and gotten it over with. And experienced vampires would not stay in the same place after being discovered.

"Perhaps they left their mentor." Benito said.

"Or killed him." I suggested. "Or, like, ya know, maybe he or she died. Alejandro died."

"We would know more of that, one day."

"Take us to this park." Paolo commanded.

"Are you going to let me speak to Barney before we go? I'd like to send him home."

"Yes, do that. But nothing funny."

"And you promised not to harm Jessica."

"Yes."

"What about you?" I turned to Benito. "Will you swear to leave her alone?"

"As long as she is no danger." he said.

Barney looked very nervous as I approached his car. Jessica's car, really. The one I bought for her. He was eyeing Paolo and Benito, who were flanking me as I approached. Several others stepped nearer as we headed toward him, too. And you could see a couple of dozen others lurking behind cars, at the bathroom, and trying to look inconspicuous all over the place.

"So hey," I said. I bent down and placed my arms on the open window. "I'm going to go with these guys."

"What? No!"

"It's going to be okay now. They need to see where the others are at."

"But..."

"Listen to me Barney," I said. Tears were filling my eyes. "It's really been great knowing you, ya know. You really are almost like a big brother to me the last few weeks."

"Stop talking like that."

"Jess has access to my bank account. Please tell her anything in there is hers now. I wish I had given her access to the rest of my money, but it's too late now."

"You can't hurt her!" he shouted at Paolo.

"Barney, stop. There's no time for this. They promised to leave Jessica alone. Tell her I love her, okay?"

"Brynne,"

"Please?"

"Okay." he nodded. He had tears on his face now, too. "Why can't you just run away now?"

"No," I was shaking my head. "We have to stop them from killing people, no matter what. I have to go now. You guys were my family, ya know? I love you guys. Please tell Peggy and Ted I'm sorry I got you all involved in this."

Leaving him sitting there, crying, as we walked away was so hard. I wish I never got him into this. I wish I would have just left town instead of telling Jess. I let her being my best friend get in the way of doing the right thing, and I may have ruined her life in the process.

"You're not afraid to ride in the car with me? Just you two?" I asked.

"You will not harm us." Benito said.

"So, do some of my kind have more trouble in the sun? I noticed that those two don't seem to like being out in the day very much."

"Yes. I'm very impressed with how well you handle it."

"Jess can, too. Is it like a bloodline thing? Like we're both descendants of Alejandro?"

"I would speculate that at least part of it is your youth," Paolo said. "But certainly, some families appear to handle it better."

"This is an advantage then, because Joanna and Julius will probably be sleeping right now."

"I believe they will know we're coming and be alert."

That's just great. Sure, they'll know we're coming. But we have a heavy numerical advantage. There has to be at least twenty people in our group. Maybe twice that. And I'm not exactly helpless.

"Stop here." I told them.

We waited for the other cars to catch up, then we got out of the car. Paolo nudged me ahead. Suddenly he had a gun, which he waved about as he looked behind bushes and trees.

"They're close. This is where we found them before. I can smell them."

"He should not have come." Benito said. I followed his gaze. Barney is at the road. "Get rid of your friend."

"Do it fast." Paolo said.

I started toward Barney, was halfway across the park, when I heard a shriek from behind me. Benito. I spun toward him. Joanna was clawing at his face as he screamed. She was... laughing. There was a crazed look of glee on her face as she tore at him with her fingernails, laughing and ripping flesh, blood squirting everywhere.

I hurried toward them as guns opened fire. Dozens of guns. But she was gone, into the trees, before she could be shot. I knelt beside Benito. Paolo was already over him. Or what remained of him. His

face was shredded and his jaws were completely exposed.

"He's still alive." I said, fighting back the vomit.

"Not for long." He grabbed Benito's hand. "Goodbye, my friend."

"I could... I could save him." I said. I'm not sure how he'd be when he healed, what part of his face would... grow back, but I think he'd live. Maybe. "I mean... if... if you wanted."

"No."

"I don't like it, but... he does good. He could do *more* good."

"Let him go in peace, Miss Brynne."

"Should I go after her?" I asked, unable to look at Benito any longer.

"I don't believe that will be necessary." Paolo said.

He was looking up as he said it. Before I could see what he was looking at, I caught site of a shining object arching through the air. I had no time to move before Julius buried the machete into my left shoulder. It went deep, at least eight inches. If it had been two inches to the left it would have completely chopped my arm from my body. Instead it went through my collar bone, all the way down into my ribs.

Everything started going dark almost immediately. I would see clearly, then nothing, then clearly again. I couldn't breathe. The pain was so intense that I had to fight not to black out completely. The blade had been treated with something, some salty substance I would guess.

Julius made a quick attempt to pull the blade from me, then gave up without a lot of effort. As his hand slipped from the machete, I saw Barney crossing the playground toward us. Guns were going off everywhere again. I saw Joanna killing at least three men, one of their intestines spilling out onto the ground when she ripped him open with a metal rod she was using as a weapon. I saw Paolo falling back as Julius moved toward him.

I lunged and grabbed the back of Julius' jacket with my right hand, yanking him back to the ground with me. We rolled over, and I held tightly onto him with my one good hand. My left arm would not move, it was completely useless now. He clawed at me, he punched at me, but I did not let go. Even when things flashed black and I felt like I'd pass out, I kept holding onto him.

"Shoot him." I screamed as loud as I could manage.

"You're pathetic." Julius shouted in my face.

Someone stabbed him with a long stick. He let go of me and was up, turning. Turning toward Barney. Guns were still firing, but he still kept moving toward Barney. I stumbled to my feet in time to yank him back again. It was all I could do, I was in no condition to fight. He spun and grabbed my head and twisted, and I went numb from the

neck down.

Barney. He's going to kill Barney! No. No! I tried to move an arm, a leg... anything, but I couldn't. I got Barney killed. Please, someone kill Julius. Please.

“Run Barney!” I mumbled. I kept repeating that as things went completely black again.

I don’t know what happened then. I know I was laying on the ground, staring at the dirt, struggling to breathe. And Paolo was beside me, speaking softly. At least it sounded softly, it may have been loud. Is this what it’s like when you die? Everything starts going black and sounds become dulled and distant?

“You promised... you... wouldn’t hurt Jess.” I said.

“Brynne,” I heard Barney say. He's alive!

I felt the light on my face when they rolled me over, but I couldn’t see anything, couldn’t feel anything below my neck. And then everything was a misty mixture of confused thoughts.

Wednesday, June 29

There was a giant rabbit preparing to attack me. I stared at it, trying to decide how much of a threat a rabbit was to me, giant or not. But I didn't feel quite like myself, so maybe the rabbit would take me. Maybe one bite from its giant front teeth would do me in. Maybe it was a vampire rabbit and would drain my blood. It seemed content to stare at me, so maybe it would decide I wasn't worth the effort.

As my eyes cleared, I noticed the rabbit wasn't quite as big as I first thought. Maybe only eighteen inches high. But it was really close, sitting just next to me. There was a balloon tied to it with the words 'get well soon honey bunny' across it.

"You back again?" Peggy asked me.

"Huh?" I asked. It hurt to talk.

"You've been fading in and out for two days."

"What happened?"

"Lay still." she said, moving over and holding her hands out. "You're still not well, hon."

"Wha..."

"You were practically cut in half." she said.

"Oh yeah. Did... did..." I felt tears building up in my eyes and choking me. "Is Barney okay?"

"He'll be fine. He got shot in the leg during the fight, but it was just grazed him, and he's mostly healed now."

"Oh. So... um... how long..."

"That was eight days ago."

I took an inventory of my injuries. My arm was almost cut off, but it had been stitched up and was healing. I could move my fingers, so that was a good sign. Though I could barely feel them. I have itchy spots all over where various cuts had begun to heal. I guess my ability to heal extends to a broken spine, too. Thank God.

"I've been force feeding you." Jessica said. She was in the doorway, holding a plastic squeeze bottle with a hose on it. "I just shove this in the back of your mouth and squeeze."

"Oh gosh, I'm so glad they didn't come for you Jessica." I said, tears filling my eyes. "You have to run away before they come."

"Relax." Peggy said. She patted my right arm.

"But... they're going to be even angrier with me now."

"Who?" Jess asked. "If you're referring to the two vamps from Wichita, they're all taken care of, thanks to you."

"Oh." That's good to know. "But... Paolo, and the Venator immortuorom..."

"We were asked to give their regards." Peggy said. She sat next to me and checked my bandages.

“I don’t understand. I thought they’d kill me. I went into this knowing they would.”

“Kill you?” Jessica said, faked humor in her voice. “Nonsense. They may need your help again in the future.” She held the bottle out for me, waiting for me to take it in my right hand. “Which, by the way, is why we have such a bountiful supply of blood at the moment.”

“I don’t…”

“Paolo says as long as we continue to stay out of trouble, and if we inform them where we are living each time we move, they will continue to supply us with food so we won’t have to resort to thievery. A quart per month for each of us.”

“They’re giving us blood?” I’m so confused.

“In exchange for our help in the future, should they need it.”

“I pray they do not.” Peggy said. “Look what happened this time.”

“So they feed us and all we have to do is turn into vampire hunters? Gee, I *so* look forward to that.”

“Not necessarily vampires.”

“Apparently there are far more monsters in the world than we knew.” Peggy said. “Which doesn’t help me sleep any better at night.”

“He wouldn’t elaborate, though.” Jess said. “Now try this. I mixed two parts blood and one part tabasco sauce. It’s way better than straight blood.”

I sucked down half the bottle quickly. She’s right, it is better. Why didn’t I try that before? I wonder what else we could mix with it.

“The balloon and the rabbit are from Teresa.” Peggy told me. “She brought them over last week.”

“She cried when she saw you.” Jessica said. “I had to hold her back so she wouldn’t hurt you by trying to hug you.”

“Maybe I should call. Maybe she’ll come visit, now that I’m awake.”

“She went back to Georgia with her parents.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry, hon. She made me promise we’d stop by to visit if we’re ever in the area, though. I told her we’d try to be by during Thanksgiving break.”

“That’s forever, though.”

“Good thing you two have forever, then.” Peggy said. She kissed my forehead. “Try to get some rest, Brynne.”

THE END

About the Author

Jennie Taylor grew up in a small rural town, always dreaming of being a writer. She enjoys listening to music, writing, painting, photography, and spending time with her lovely wife. This is her first foray into publishing her work. She hopes to continue publishing in the future; she has many novels in the works. While she's not enjoying her creative pursuits or working at her day job, she can be found watching Pokemon reruns, Project Runway, American Idol, and Korean dramas. Look for more novels coming soon!

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